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Vol. XXXI.



"THE WRETCHES ARE HUNTING ME!" EXCLAIMED THE SEWER-SEARCHER; "IT IS MY LIFE THEY SEEK!"

Cast-off Cale,

THE SCAPEGOAT DETECTIVE;

OR,
Sailing Under False Colors.

The Story of the Hot Hustle at Swagger Alley.

BY JO PIERCE,
AUTHOR OF "SPICY JIM," "TOM THISTLE,"
"DENNIS DUFF," "FIVE POINTS PHIL,"
"BOB O' THE BOWERY," ETC.

CHAPTER I. THE PLOT WITHIN A PLOT.

THE man with the rough clothes and bushy brows had been surveying the house for some time—a house about as unprepossessing as himself. It was one of those old buildings which the march of improvement has not yet driven out of New York, and which look so much like a page out of the buried, almost forgotten past.

This particular house seemed to interest the stranger, however, for he was literally spying upon it, if appearances went for anything.

A boy came out, and after a brief hesitation, the man accosted him:

"Young man, who lives there?"

The questioner was made the object of a long survey before he had a reply, but it came in a very cheerful voice when it was heard at all.

"Wal, I sorter hev my bein' there, at times. Can't say I live, but simply draw my breath there. That's Swagger Alley, an' nobody pretends ter live who holds forth there."

The good humor of the youth had some impression on his companion, whose stern face relaxed a little.

"What is your name?"

"Caleb Robbins. I'm called that because my folks thought when they named me I would die of chicken-pox, an' it didn't matter much what handle they give me. They put their hands in the grab-bag, an' flung out the first thing that come along."

"Who else lives there?"

"Peter Robbins, Margaret Robbins—they's my parients—Percy, Claude, Guy, Reginald, Pearl, Daisy, Violet, an' mebbe some more o' my brothers an' sisters. I ain't counted them lately, an' can't say jest how many there are, or what their names are."

"Is that one of them?"

The stranger indicated a girl of about thirteen years who had just come from somewhere near the house in question, but Caleb shook his head.

"No; that's my 'hun.'"

"Your what?"

"Hun!" calmly answered the boy.

"What in the world is that?"

Caleb gave the questioner a look of surprise.

"Where in the world did you come from, mister? You must hev blowed in from 'way-back, ef you don't know that 'hun' means honey, an' that 'honey' means a feller's best girl. You want ter charter an Express train an' keep up with the procession, ef you hev ter race the defunct ter the end o' the line. A feller who ain't in it is out of it, by jinks! Yes; that's Betty Dow, an' she's my 'hun.'"

The stranger did not seem to care for Betty, now he knew who she was. He looked, instead, at the old house.

"Is Peter Robbins in?" he asked.

"Probbly is, unless he's gone ter rush the growler."

"You don't speak very respectfully of your father."

"Mister, I ain't the pet o' the flock. They hev left me ter shift fer myself all along, an' now I'm willin' they should shift fer themselves. We've sorter agreed ter disagree. See?"

Caleb was a bright and cheerful boy, and he now looked up into the stranger's face with his most amiable smile. He might have troubles on his mind, but it was clear they did not worry him seriously. Although but fifteen years old, he looked self-reliant enough not to need much help from the parental hand.

The questioner appeared on the point of asking more things, but changed his mind and said nothing. After a little meditation he turned and walked rapidly away.

"Wal," quoth Caleb, "he don't stop long fer one that's so inquisitive. Now, I wonder what he cares about my parent? Peter Robbins don't hev much company except birds of a feather. This chap looks as ef he might be a bird of a

feather, but he don't seem ter be one o' the governor's gang. Who is he?"

The query made brief curiosity in Caleb's mind, but it soon disappeared.

"He's a gallus-looker, but he don't want ter monkey with the old gent. Peter kin give cards an' spades ter anybody an' get the game, then. Keep off, mister!"

The advice, which the unknown was too far advanced to hear, was in a happy-go-luck tone, and Caleb seemed to be as much at ease as ever. He wandered on down the street and soon forgot all about the man.

The latter did not forget what he had in mind. He walked away from Caleb and went to a cheap eating-house. There he had supper and did some thinking at the same time. When done, he took from his pocket a paper which he unfolded and examined attentively.

The contents seemed to please him, and a grim smile overspread his face.

"Dick Hubbel, you're in luck!" he muttered. "Work this rifle and your purse will be full of the shiners. Now to bluff Vance Drayton!"

The last low-muttered words were spoken as he saw a young man enter the dining-room. The latter paused and looked around eagerly. He saw Dick Hubbel and came forward quickly.

"So you're here!" he exclaimed.

"Well, I ain't nowhere else, Master Vance," softly answered Dick.

"What luck?"

Hubbel shook his head.

"No luck, yet, Master Vance."

"You have not found Peter Robbins?"

"No; an' no sign o' him. Don't be discouraged, though; it'll all come out right. I told you I would find him, even ef I had to tramp the streets until my feet dropped off. I'll do it, too."

The last statement did not impress the listener so very forcibly. He drummed on the table and then asked:

"Have you the paper? I see no immediate prospect of your being able to use it, so I would rather have it in my own hands. If it is lost I know not what would become of me. It's too valuable to take risks on, you see."

"True, Master Vance, true. Yes, you ought to have the paper, an' you shall, but I ain't got et with me, jest now. I knowed it was valuable, so I locked it up in the safe belongin' ter a friend o' mine."

"I will go there with you and get it."

"You'll have ter wait till mornin', good master, fer the place is always shut up at six, an' no way ter git in."

"You regard it as safe?"

"Bless you, yes; as safe as gold. Nobody kin get at it. Rest easy; it shall be at hand when you want it."

"I'll take it in the morning. You know it is what I rely upon to establish my claims. When you have found Peter Robbins, I'll either hand it over to you temporarily, or make a copy, but there must be no risk taken. I trust you, Dick, and feel sure I can do so safely, but the paper—you know what I rely upon it to do."

Richard Hubbel winked fast and mildly.

"Yes, yes; it's quite right you should keep it to yourself. As you say, I am as reliable as the rock of ages, but care is better than brilliancy. Yes, yes; you're quite right!"

If Vance had known the deceit which was in the fellow's mind he would have put a stopper on Richard, then and there, but he depended upon him for aid, and felt he had to trust him, whether he wished to or not.

Vance was but little more than half his companion's age, and very different in appearance. The forty-five years which had gone over Dick's head had left him age-worn, but not honorable and interesting to look at. If he had led a good life, he was unlucky; he looked like a tramp in many ways, and not an attractive one at that.

The younger man was intelligent, refined and gentlemanly of aspect. He had a good face and form, and would have passed anywhere as one fit to move in good society.

At present there was a cloud on his face. Dick well knew why it was there. He knew, too, he could relieve all preliminary fears by telling what he had lately learned from Caleb Robbins, but he did not make the statement. There was treachery in Dick's mind.

Vance did not linger much longer. He was not blessed with worldly goods, yet he was not accustomed to eating in places like this. He had to get his dinner elsewhere, so he bade the other man adieu and went his way.

Dick looked after him with a cunning gleam in his eyes.

"Oh! no; I ain't got the paper here!" he muttered, with the ghost of a laugh. "I don't carry things so valuable around with me. Oh! no; I wouldn't think of it!"

From his pocket he took out the same document he had before examined. There was nothing new to be seen about it, yet he gazed and laughed in high glee.

"A right nice thing to have, I do declare! Ah! ef it but yields the golden harvest it ought, I shall be rich. Rich! Think of it, you old rounder! It's better than tramping the roads up the Hudson in summer, and sleeping in Bowery lodging-houses in winter!"

From the same pocket he produced a box of peculiar stamp. It looked well-nigh water and air proof, and was of nickel. Into this he put the paper.

Beer was sold in the restaurant, and he imbibed, thought, chuckled and lounged away the time for some while. At last he rose and went out.

His face had grown serious, and it appeared that he had business of importance on hand. He walked rapidly, and at the end of half an hour again neared the house of which he had taken notice when he questioned Caleb Robbins. His face was serious as he again regarded it.

"I don't know what will come o' this. I may be goin' among hard cases. Possibly I shall get into trouble in Swagger Alley. Wal, I'll risk it. Here goes!"

CHAPTER II. TRACES OF CRIME.

CALEB ROBBINS and Betty Dow stood near the house where the latter lived, and but a few doors from the boy's own home. They were talking in a light and happy way.

"Spring is here, Betty," remarked Caleb, "an' summer will soon be toddlin' after. When it does get here you kin rest easy that I won't forget my 'hun!'"

Betty looked pleased.

"I'm old enough ter go ter picnics, now, I think," she answered.

"Bless my shoes! o' course you be. You're tall, an' you kin dance like an angel. Say, you'll be one o' the star attractions, but don't you let nobody else like you too well. You're my honey, ye know."

Betty chewed her handkerchief bashfully.

"You're mine, too," she agreed.

"That's the stuff, Elizabeth! Et does me good ter hear ye. Stick ter that view an' you kin hev all the fun you want, this summer."

"Kin you get the price?" asked Betty, not in a mercenary, but an anxious spirit.

"I should smile! I'm gettin' bigger, I be; an' I kin earn more than I did. I mean my 'honey' shall have a first-class blow-out, all the season!"

"You're awfully good, Cale!" declared the girl, her eyes beaming.

"I'm good ter myself, this time. Who wouldn't be, with sech an attraction ter cheer him up?"

The boy poked Betty gently in the side, and they looked volumes at each other. They had always been neighbors. More than that, they had been friends from their earliest recollection. Cale had not been a favorite of fortune, or of his parents, and he owed many a favor to Betty, who had found food for him in her own family larder when he had none of his own.

The boy had not given the names of his brothers and sisters correctly to Dick Hubbel, but except for that he had told a true story. For some reason he was in ill-favor with his parents, and always had been. He had been the drudge and scapegoat, and, in his parents' opinion, the black sheep of the flock. There was not much for any one in the Robbins household, but he was deprived of his share.

Those who knew him best wondered how he had managed to grow up, and to keep body and soul together; but he had been the least concerned of anybody over the matter.

Grow up he did, and a sturdy, self-reliant youth he was.

Cale and Betty continued to dream of the days to come for some time, but their talk was finally interrupted by the appearance of some one not a resident of the vicinity, and yet no stranger to Cale.

"Hullo!" muttered the boy, "what's his nibs doin' here?"

This time Dick did not hesitate. He walked boldly to the door, opened it without ceremony and walked in.

"Gone ter see Peter!" commented Cale.

"Wal, ef Peter's in his usual amiable mood t'other feller may get more hospitality than he bargains fer. Ef he had advised with me, I'd

"a' told him ter git a policeman ter back him up afore he went in."

As a whole this was intended as a joke. Nevertheless, Cale was aware that his father was anything but an angel. Sometimes, the boy wondered if there were not things in Peter's life which the police might like to know, yet he had never seen any proof that his father was a law-breaker. He did know, however, that he was of violent temper, a bully, and inclined to act dishonest whenever he had the chance.

When Dick disappeared Cale gave him but little further thought. The interesting interview with Betty was duly finished, after which he entered the house by the side door and was soon in his own room at the top of the building. As he went up he heard the sound of voices which indicated conversation between the caller and Peter.

If he had cared to act the listener he might have done so without any difficulty, but he saw no reason why he should. He did not care what had brought Dick Hubbel there.

He went to bed, and was soon asleep.

For one of his years he was not a heavy sleeper. Perhaps it was this, and perhaps it was something else which made him awaken anon, and lie wondering why he was awake.

Then he heard the door softly opened.

A dim light began to shine in the place, and he saw his father. It was very unusual for Peter to visit that region by night or day, and Cale obeyed a sudden impulse and closed his eyes tightly.

Robbins crept to the bedside as carefully as if he had been walking on eggs; then came to a stop. He held the lamp over Cale and seemed to regard him sharply. Very much at a loss, the latter breathed on serenely and gave no sign that he heard.

It took Peter some time to satisfy himself, but it was, perhaps, done at last. He turned away and stole from the room as silently as he had come in. Not until the door was reclosed did Cale open his eyes.

"Wal, now," he soliloquized, "what in the world is up? The honored head o' this house never come this way before ter see ef I was hev'in' pleasant dreams. Why did he do it, now? What's up? I say!"

Sliding out of bed he went to the door and listened. Nothing was to be heard there. He opened the door and investigated further. If he had been in a deserted house the silence would not have been more striking.

Usually he did not trouble himself to know what was going on in the household. Being the son in ill-repute, he never was told much, and cared for nothing more than he knew. Now, he was sincerely curious.

After a little thought he went further on the tour of investigation. Creeping down the stairs he neared the room where the family made their headquarters. He could hear voices beyond.

Pausing outside the door he proceeded to listen. The murmur of men's low-spoken words was audible and fairly distinct. He could detect the voice of his father, and that of at least one other man, whom he did not recognize by the means at hand.

"There's a pile o' risk in it," remarked the unknown.

"Wal, it's got ter be done, ain't it?" demanded Peter Robbins.

"I guess it has."

"Sure! We can't set down an' let the thing run itself."

"I s'pose we shall get done up an' sent to—"

"Nonsense! Don't be a coward!"

"I ain't no coward, but ef you think I like the job I speak of, you are all wrong. I'd rather work fer myself than fer the State."

"You talk as ef we're goin' ter git caught. Wal, ef we be, I'm as sorry as you, but I don't intend to. We must pull through without any mishap. Brace up, old man; we'll get there all correct."

"The police—"

"Durn the police!"

"They'll 'durn' us, ef they get at us! Now, don't think I'm weakenin', fer I ain't, but this thing sort o' rattles a feller. Every time I look over toward the corner I—"

"Don't look toward the corner at all. Keep yer eyes at home!" roughly ordered Robbins. "We're in fer this game, an' we want ter carry et through. Ef I'd had my way it wouldn't 'a' been so, but I hadn't any more ter say about it than you. Et was all done of a sudden. I was drove ter bay— But let that drop!"

"Wish we could drop the thing in the corner as easy as that!"

"Now, you hush! Keep yer eyes away from the corner, an' your thoughts, too. We'll be all

right, I tell ye. The hour is late, an' we hev only ter run the gantlet o' one policeman an' it's done. Ef we weaken, though, we stand a good chance o' gettin' our stomachs full o' food that won't agree with our digestion."

"It must hev been a mighty hard blow—"

"Hush up! None o' that, now!"

Peter spoke sharply, and his companion took the advice and relapsed into silence.

All this Caleb had heard, but it had given him no great amount of information. His curiosity had been aroused to the highest pitch, however, and he was beset with wonder as to the nature of that which was agitating the unknown man; the "thing in the corner" which he was so anxious to "drop."

Cale tried the door, resolved to hazard a look within if such a thing was possible, but was not surprised to find the key had been turned. There was but one way to get view of the other room; hence, all hope of it was past unless they should make some move which would help him out.

Silence prevailed for some time, there, after which they resumed talk in tones so low he could hear nothing.

It had always been his plan to let his relatives alone as severely as they did him, and he would not now have taken any part in the matter had it not been for what had gone before. Peter Robbins's visit to his room was a marked event in itself, and what he had heard was only so much more.

"Peter an' the other duck is up ter mischief; that's dead sure. Ef they wasn't, they wouldn't be afeered o' the police. Wonder what it is, anyhow? S'pose I might as well go ter bed, but I sorter take an interest in all funny biz."

Time passed and he heard the clock strike one.

"Now for it!" announced Robbins.

Man No. 2 was heard to sigh. He said nothing, and both began to move about. Preparations were made for some unusual event. Cale was tempted to make his presence known and see what would come of it, but did not have quite enough temerity to take the step.

The movements of the pair grew heavy, and of a nature at which Cale hazarded a surmise.

"They're movin' somethin'. What kin it be? Seems ter be heavy, but I don't know o' anything they should want ter carry away that's o' that sort. Ef they got away with the stove I would like ter see Peter meet his honored wife in the mornin'."

Whatever the object was, the men soon got it out of sight and hearing. Caleb heard them go out with heavy steps, as if they were bearing a burden of like nature. Then he could hear no more.

Again he tried the door, but it was impossible to open it without breaking the lock, and this he had no desire to do.

Returning to his room he took place by the window and proceeded to watch for them. They were slow in coming, if it was by that way they intended to move, and as the moments passed he grew sleepy and things about him grew vague and shadowy.

He watched no longer; he slept.

When he awoke he realized that a good deal of time had passed. The moon was shining into the room, and its position indicated that the night was well spent.

"Young feller, you've gone an' done it, now!" he muttered, in disgust. "Go ter sleep like a log when you ought ter be awake an' spyin' on the enemy, will you? Pretty huckleberry you are! The whole o' New York might be upset, an' you wouldn't know of it. Oh! you're a daisy!"

When his disgust had moderated a little he decided to take one last step, and again descended to see what the lower part of the house could tell of the lost chapter in the events of the night. He was not surprised at the result.

All was dark and silent, there, and no closed doors opposed his progress. Whatever had been done was all done, and the actors in the drama had gone to their rest.

Caleb returned to the garret and spent the rest of the night in bed. He was not disturbed.

In the morning there was no trace of any disorder or departure from the usual course of events, either in the house or the inmates, as far as Cale could see. True, he was not long with them. Unlike the other members of the Robbins brood, he had to furnish his own food, so, while the favorite children were lazily crawling out of bed, the Cast-off one had eaten in his own room, and then gone out to amuse himself, or work, as circumstances might direct.

During the forenoon luck was with him, and he earned enough to fill his pockets with cash,

and his mind with serenity. Shortly after, he wandered back to the alley where he was supposed to reside.

There he encountered Betty Dow.

"Hullo!" he cried, "do I see you? How's the state o' your blood, this P.M.?"

"Where've you been, Cale?" asked the girl.

"Fishin'! Fishin' fer dollars ter carry me an' my honey ter Coney Island, this summer. Oh! I tell you we'll jest hev a high-jinks of a time! You bet!"

It was an argument Betty could appreciate, and she showed the fact. Her eyes grew brighter than ever, and her smile made Cale wish he had her at Coney Island, then.

Then Betty grew coquettish.

"I presume before then you'll get some other girl, though."

"Not much; I ain't got but one 'honey,' you bet! You're her, an' you know it. I ain't a hog about nothin', an' ef I was, I wouldn't want but one best girl. As fer hev'in' any but you, why, I'd jest be goin' clean out o' my mind ef I thought o' such a thing!"

The girl looked gratified.

"I guess you mean well," she agreed. "Don't you mind my jokes, Cale, fer I won't think ill o' you."

"Certain not, nor me o' you."

Caleb rested his hand on Betty's elbow, as if she needed help to stand, and they discussed the summer season for the hundredth time. This kept them busy for some minutes, but Betty suddenly aroused.

"I wanted to speak to you concernin' something else, Cale," she seriously observed.

"Let 'er go, honey," he advised.

"What happened at your house, last night?"

"What happened?"

"Yes."

"Dunno! Why?"

"I heard somebody cry out, there, as if in trouble."

"You did?"

"Yes. It was late at night, or, at least, after I usually go to bed, but this night I was up late. I had just gone to my room, an' stopped by the window to look out, when I heard it. Seemed ter me as if somebody was in distress!"

CHAPTER III.

THE MISSING MAN.

CALEB applied his fingers to his head and scratched vigorously for an idea. The statement came at a time when it was very suggestive. Certain things had occurred in his own experience which made all this striking.

"You heard somebody who seemed ter be in distress?" he slowly repeated.

"That's it," answered Betty.

"In my palatial abode?"

"Yes."

"What hour?"

"Must 'a' been about eleven o'clock, I reckon."

"Et wa'n't nobody with the toothache, ner the colic, was it?"

"It was just one cry, as if somebody was hurt bad. Jest such a sound as Tim Murray made when the wagon run over his foot."

"Could you tell what part o' the house et was?"

"Seemed ter be in yer mother's kitchen!"

Caleb was really startled. All this might mean nothing, but it was in that room he had heard the conversation between his father and the unknown man, just after the former had come to his room to see if he was awake.

"Tell me more about it," he urged.

"That's all I know. I heard the cry as I stood by the window, an' I didn't hear no more. I listened for some time, but it didn't sound again. That's all I kin tell, but it impressed me there was something wrong about it."

"Mebbe there was," agreed Cale, absently.

"What do you mean?"

"What? Oh! nothin' much. I say mebbe there was. Mebbe, you understand. I don't know nothin' erbout it."

Caleb was not inclined to be too free on a subject where he really had no information, even with Betty, but she had left food for thought which was not likely to die out of his mind.

What had become of Dick Hubbel? The boy had seen him go into the house. Had he come out in safety?

At that moment Cale saw one of his hopeful brothers not far away, and he conceived a sudden idea. The brother had been in the kitchen when Dick called, and was of such an inquiring disposition that he was not likely to have let any chance slip to learn all he could about the guest.

As soon as possible Cale excused himself and went over to Alf, that being the name of the brother.

"Say," he began, "you saw his nibs who called last night, didn't you? The stranger, you know."

"What ef I did?" demanded Alf.

"Wal, I thought ef you seen him you probably did see him."

"What of it?"

"What time did he go away?"

"I didn't time him."

"Did you see him go?"

"Sa-ay, young feller, w'ot's eatin' you, anyhow? Ef you want ter know about the feller, why don't you go an' see him?"

"I dunno where he is."

"Wal, you're a great jay ter howl erbout a man you don't know nothin' about!"

"I ain't aware ez I've done any howlin'," composedly returned Caleb. "Ez a rule I never join in no howlin' contest, nohow. It's a very simple matter, an' all I ask fer is, do yer know what become o' the feller?"

Cale was already wishing he had not interviewed his brother. The latter had no more love for him than the parents had, and was evidently refusing information out of mere spite.

"S'pose ye ask the old man," suggested Alf, well aware that the simplest request would be ungraciously received by the father of the family. "Hullo! why didn't you do that at first? Why do ye come prowlin' around me about the matter?"

An idea was in Alf's mind; not a logical, or even a suspicious one, but his hatred for Cale suggested to his prolific mind that here was the opportunity to get Cale into trouble again.

"Guess I'll tell the old man erbout it!" he added.

"Jest ez you please."

Caleb shut his teeth tightly. He had been given too many hard knocks from his comrades to care for a new one except in one way. The present case had such interest for him that he was reluctant to have it go to ruin thus.

Alf did not show at that time whether he positively intended to carry out his threat, but his work was seen later on.

When Caleb re-entered the house the first person he encountered was Peter Robbins, and it needed but one glance to see that Peter was in ill-humor. He glared at his unloved son, and then sharply exclaimed:

"Come here!"

Cale duly halted.

"I've got something ter say ter you!" added the parent.

"I'm here," calmly admitted Cale.

"You won't be, long!" snapped Peter. "No, you won't! Boy, you kin pack up yer duds an' get out o' my house on the run. We've had enough o' you here, an' the sooner you git a move on, the better you'll please me. Do you understand? You're ter pack up, get out, an' never come back. Ef I see ye nigh my house I'll trounce ye like sin! You hear?"

Cale did hear, and with equanimity. He had been kicked and cuffed around all his life, and had made his own way until he was not alarmed by the order to leave the parental roof.

"I'm on," he answered.

"You kin be off in jest ten minutes. Ef you ain't gone then I'll lam ye. Hear?"

"You speak right ter the point, an' I see no way fer me ter help hearin'. All right; I'll skip the tra-la-la. But say, what's the racket, anyhow?"

"Alf has told me about ye."

"Alfred is a whooper-up! What did he say?"

"You have been quizzin' him, an' tryin' ter get secrets out o' him on the sly—"

"So there is a secret?"

Peter Robbins started perceptibly. He no longer glared at his son in wrath, but looked singularly troubled by something.

"Who said there was a secret?"

"I thought you come pretty close to it."

"It's a lie; I never said nothin' o' the sort—never! No; there ain't no secret, but you have been pryin' inter my affairs, an' that I won't stand. It was always your way ter poke yer nose into other peoples' affairs, an' I've got tired of it. I don't know how nature ever give me sech an unworthy son. Ef nature was in error, I won't be. You kin git out!"

"All right," calmly agreed Caleb.

"There ain't gratitude enough in yer whole bein' ter fill a thimble," went on Peter, with growing wrath. "Here I've taken the best o' care o' you; I've fed ye an' housed ye, an' now you give me the dead shake as ef I was only a dog, after all my goodness. I've got my opinion as ter who the dog is!"

"Peter, we won't quarrel over it a hair," responded Cale, good-humoredly. "I don't see as we have an atom of difference of opinion on any subject. I'll obey you an' get out o' yer house, an' I dare say it will relieve ye of a big load, after the powerful sight you've done fer me. Yes, I'll skip!"

"Do it, an' never come back!"

"Here goes!"

Cale rose and walked toward his garret room without the least visible emotion. To some boys it would have been a most serious matter, but not to one who had been used as he had. For years the garret had been all the hold he had on the place and family, and it was not much to give up. He picked up his belongings, which were few in number, and made a little parcel. This done he was ready to depart.

By that time the story had gone abroad among the other children that Caleb was to separate from them, and they collected to see him go. Several shouts hailed him, and he paused and looked at them. None of the number had been friendly with him, but he remembered, then, that they were his own kin, and there was no ill-feeling in his heart.

They were not of the same mind.

"Say, don't you wish you hadn't?" cried Alf.

"Where ye goin' ter sleep ter-night?"

"Show yer smartness, now!"

"Goin' in as a rag-picker?"

These and other shouts greeted him, and he saw that all had a part in the demonstration against him. It did not trouble him; it merely settled one point, and he knew how to act.

"I'm much obliged fer your good wishes," he remarked, with unflinching even temper. "When I get rich I'll remember you. Be good kids, an' keep yer noses clean. So-long!"

Peter Robbins suddenly appeared.

"Get out!" he shouted. "I won't hev you here, contaminatin' my children!"

"Don't worry about the dear little ducksies!" advised the boy, as smilingly as ever. "We shall all meet in the sweet by-and-by. So-long!"

Waving his hand the speaker passed calmly out. A moment later and the door closed on the cast-off son. Was it forever?

CHAPTER IV.

FACE TO FACE WITH PERIL.

VANCE DRAYTON sat in his room alone. His head was bowed down, and his manner one of deep dejection. A footstep sounded in the hall, and he started up with a nervous air. When he saw that nobody came to the door he grew somewhat reassured, but walked to the window and looked out secretly, evidently taking great pains not to be seen.

Some one he saw, himself, and he started again.

"Darby!" he exclaimed. "Now for the verdict. Will it be life or death? I dare not expect anything favorable."

A man entered the house, and was soon in the apartment. He was but little older than Vance, but of a different class in life. He wore garments not of the style preferred by men of modest taste, and easily ranked as a sport, but his was not a bad face by any means.

He shook his head gravely.

"No news?" asked Vance, almost inaudibly.

"I can get no trace of Dick Hubbel. I've done my best, but he has not been seen at his usual haunts in a week."

"Then the last hope is gone!" groaned Vance, sinking into a chair.

"The disappearance of the fellow is mysterious."

"Why so? I trusted him as a last resort, but with the gravest of fears. The sum and substance of it is, he has gone over to the enemy, and sold the papers, and his own soul for the money they could give him. You will see it's so at my trial. The papers will be at hand, and so will the knave who has betrayed me. Perhaps it is as well; I suppose I am doomed, anyhow, and I shall have the satisfaction of knowing the exact state of the case."

The words were bitterly spoken, and the "satisfaction" seemed to be a delusion. Vance was like one in the bonds of despair. He had played his last card and lost.

"Dick Hubbel fails us," seriously remarked the sport, "but are we down to stay?"

"What else can it be? The house is watched; I cannot venture out without being arrested; and in a short time the police will be here. Yes; the last hope is gone!"

"Drayton, I never yet went back on a man, or failed to fight for him to the last gasp while a hope did remain. If you take my advice you

will seize upon the faint gleam of light which dimly see spread out before you."

"And that?" questioned Vance, mechanically.

The sport went to the closet, and brought out an old suit of clothes. It was one of the kind Vance had been accustomed to wear at any time. Beside it he put a bottle of some sort of dark-hued liquid.

"With this," he observed, "I can make you a different man. The question is, if you are disguised, can you pass the policeman? Something depends upon your nerve. He may, or may not, be expecting some secret attempt, enough to be on his guard. Are you ready to do your part, and do it well?"

"It is only a reprieve."

"It may be more. Once get away you may be able to elude discovery until there is a chance to prove your innocence. Thus far nothing has been published. The usually over-alert newspapers have slipped a cog, and if you should disappear you can rely upon it that they will not hear of it. Thus, the delay might be the means of your establishing your innocence before anything was sent out to the world. Thus, again, you would escape without the unpleasant task of convincing your friends that the police had judged wisely in pronouncing you innocent."

A wise man has written that "Hope springs eternal in the human breast." Vance suddenly aroused from his mood of discontent. Life and honor were certainly dear to him.

"Can it be done?" he demanded, eagerly.

"It can be tried."

"The disguise—have you really faith in it?"

"I can make you the most respectable colored gentleman you ever saw in your life. Can you act it?"

"Give me a chance!" cried Vance. "Your logic is beyond argument. I will get away if I can—ay, if only for the reprieve of an hour. To work!—to work!"

He was excited, then, but the sport was not. Accustomed to scenes even more exacting than the present one, he felt as cool as ever. He went about the task with a steady head and skillful hands.

First he required Vance to strip off his garments sufficiently to aid the undertaking; then he proceeded to change his color. The dark-hued article was laid on liberally, and Vance was transformed from his old color to one entirely new and impressive. His own fears that the work would be inartistically done were not to be realized, and under his companion's touch wonders were achieved.

He could scarcely credit his own good luck when he saw the end.

"Darby, you are a trump card!" he exclaimed.

"I am a fighter," amended the sport. "Reserve your flattery for some other occasion, and if we get through, pile it on as thick as you please. Now for the clothes!"

The dilapidated garments were duly donned. Vance hardly knew himself when thus equipped. Perfect, indeed, was the trick, as far as he could see.

As a final touch Darby sprinkled the younger man's hair with something which gave him a venerable appearance, and then brought out from the closet a cane which was stout enough to carry out the notion of decrepitude.

"Bend your back and practice!" he ordered, tersely.

Vance obeyed, and moved around with the action of an old man.

"Well done, well done!" declared Darby.

"I'd have you practice more if I could, but there is no time. The police may be on the way at this moment. Come! Let us get out!"

They left the room and went down the first flight of stairs. They were just going further when the front door swung open and several men walked in. Both the adventurers knew at once what it meant. The men did not belong in the house, and it was clear they were police agents who had in some way secured a key.

"Lost!" gasped Vance.

He would have drawn back, but Darby resolutely held him where he was, doing it so neatly that no one below noticed the episode.

"Brace up!" Darby ordered. "All depends on yourself, now. There's nobody here who'll give you away, so if you act your part there's no reason why you should not get away."

The sport did not have the confidence he professed, for he could not believe the trick would amount to anything under the circumstances, but he was aware it was the only chance. The game of bluff was all that would, or could, win.

The leader of the party called out sharply:

"Come down here!"

Darby punched Vance in the ribs and started.

sport was one who had always kept on the right side of the law, but he was prepared to risk reputation and liberty, now. He took pains to get ahead of his companion, eager to shoulder most of the danger himself, but it was not to be. The leader looked only at Vance.

"Say, you!" he exclaimed, "show us over the house, and see to it you don't play any tricks!"

Vance was not a coward, and he was now clear enough of head to discover that the first act in the drama had gone aright. He had been mistaken for a house-servant. Was it possible to trade on the error?

With a mighty effort he commanded his voice and asked:

"Who would you like to see, sah?"

"Vance Drayton, or, as perhaps you may know him, Allen Barnes. Do you know him?"

"Oh! yes, sah; Mr. Barnes does board here."

"Is he in?"

"Reckon he's in his room, sah. Shall I go and see?"

"I'll go and see, but you are to go along. I guess you know what we want, and I caution you not to play any tricks. It's unlawful to give aid to a prisoner or accused person, and if you don't want to go up, yourself, you will obey all orders and do the best for us you can. Understand?"

"Yes, sah, I do, and I tell you I ain't goin' to get myself into trouble for nobody else. Let others take care of themselves, and this nigger will do the same."

Darby could have hugged Vance in his delight. The young man's acting was admirable, and the sport was one to appreciate nerve.

"Lead on!" was the next order.

Vance led. He made due use of his cane, but not enough to give the impression that he was so broken down as to be of no use for household work. Straight to his own recent quarters he went, and the officer opened the door. Naturally, no one was there.

Darby had put the coloring matter out of sight and replaced all other articles in proper place, so there was nothing suspicious to see. That the officer was disappointed in not finding a man there was evident, but he said nothing until he had looked in the closet and under the bed. Then he turned sharply upon the "colored man."

"Say, where's that fellow hiding?" he demanded.

"Don't know, sah; I had an idea he was in this room."

"How long since you saw him?"

"Don't know positive as I have since last night, but, laws! I supposed he was all right here," and Vance looked bewildered.

The officer turned to Darby.

"Who are you?" he called out ominously.

"My name is Darby Westcott. I called to see a lady friend," very serenely replied the sport. "I think I've seen the man you refer to, but I have no actual acquaintance with him. What's up, anyhow?"

"The law wants him. He came here only a short time ago, and to keep out of sight of the police. He is here now!" suddenly added the officer. "You black fellow, produce him!"

"Fore the lord, sah, you're welcome ter look all around. I reckon mebbe the landlady is out, but she wouldn't objec' ter the law havin' full sway. She's a legal woman; she is, sah!"

"Show me over the premises. I know the fellow is here, and I'll have him if I am compelled to rix the floors up to do it!"

Despite these strong assertions Vance was gaining courage. His success thus far was of the greatest value, and he went about the rest firmly. His greatest fear was that some of the members of the family would do him harm by revealing the fact that the supposed colored man did not belong in the house. If this happened, it would be very awkward.

The search began.

The premises had been so carefully watched that the police felt sure the "wanted" man had not got out of sight, and they expected to unearth him without serious trouble. Yet, as they went from room to room, doubts began to rise in the official minds.

Their prey was not unearthed so easily as they had expected.

At last the final room had been looked to in vain.

The leader turned sharply upon the guide. He tried to scare the old colored person by blackest of frowns.

"You black scoundrel!" he exclaimed, "trot out that man, or I'll lock you up in his place!"

CHAPTER V.

NOT A SHARP AFTER ALL.

THE man thus roughly addressed looked justly aggrieved.

"Deed, sah, I ain't done nothin'!" he protested. "I dunno about him, nohow."

"Don't lie!"

"Jest what I'm bound not ter do, sah. I'd lie fer you ef I would fer any one, but I'd get ketched in it ef I did. I ain't hid no man, an' so I can't perdooce him. I would ef I could, ter please you!"

Even the police leader had to smile transiently. It looked as if the supposed colored man was a very guileless person who had not the strongest of minds. But they could not spend much time in being amused with him.

"You say all the other folks in the family are away. Isn't that a very unusual circumstance?"

"No, sah; they're mostly women, an' them is fickle an' frivolous, you know. They goes out ter vanities more than us men!"

Vance's audacity was increasing; he was acting his part in a way which pleased Darby immensely. The idea was in the young man's mind that he would win or go down to defeat in a blaze of glory.

"Show me over the house again!" commanded the dissatisfied officer.

He was accommodated, and the eyes of man had never been sharper, yet no hidden criminal was revealed. Surprised, disgusted and bewildered, the leader once more came to a halt. He would almost have sworn his prey had been in the house, but he could not find him.

Next he tried the effect of declaring that the wanted one had gone, and that those then present knew where he was, but the disguised object of the inquiry did not weaken, and Darby was equally steady.

The leader was nonplused. He called one of his men aside and consulted with him, but without result. Their combined wisdom was not equal to the occasion.

There seemed only one thing to do, and they reluctantly began preparations to go. Accompanied by the two men who had been entertaining them they went down-stairs. When in the lower hall the front door suddenly opened and a woman came in. It was the landlady, and dismay followed her appearance.

She was not of the kind who cling to the law at all times; on the contrary, there was room to suspect that she would much rather go against the law than for it, but she had not in any way been warned of the present danger, and it would be strange if she did not betray the fact that the "colored" man was not an inmate of her house.

Darby saw this and took the bull by the horns at once.

"Gentlemen, the landlady!" he announced. "Mrs. Osland, these callers are police, and your man, James"—he motioned to Vance—"and I have been showing them over the place, as they were in quest of one of your boarders, who is wanted, but cannot be found. I refer to Mr. Barnes. Our colored friend, James, thinks Barnes is not in, and as we cannot find him, the idea appears correct."

Mrs. Osland was not too dull to catch on. She was able to recognize Vance, despite his disguise, and as he had paid his board, she was all in his favor.

"I don't know where Barnes is," she unblushingly returned.

"Some of you have hidden him!" declared the officer, angrily. "I know there is a plot here, and I'm going to get at it. Madam, bear in mind that it is a serious thing to go contrary to the law. One who tries to thwart the police when they are seeking to arrest a man is liable to go to the Island for an indefinite period. Be careful that you don't invite that fate."

Again she was equal to the emergency.

"I'm not going to get myself into trouble for the best man in the country," she promptly asserted, "but I can't tell you what I don't know. The man Barnes has not been with us long, and has never confided his secrets to me. If he is in hiding, I'll swear I did not hide him, nor have I any idea of where he is hiding."

The leader of the police was not satisfied, but he could not see his way clear to better the situation in any way.

By some unaccountable means the wanted man had escaped the net for the time, and the only resource was to wait and watch.

"I shall have to put a detective in your house for the time being, madam," he remarked.

"Do it quietly, and I have no objection," was her ready acquiescence. "Let him pose as a new boarder; then I shall not lose any real boarders through his presence."

There seemed no objection to this, and the plan was carried out. One man was left, and the others went their way.

Darby managed to get a secret word with Vance.

"Take your time and be careful, but come to the house as soon as you can slide away without alarming anybody. Delay is dangerous!"

It was all the wary sport had to say, and he soon went away with the main body of the officers. The one watcher remained, but Vance did not stay with him. Naturally, the place of a servant was in the kitchen, and to that place he went.

Granted time to think, some of the young man's courage disappeared, and he wondered where he had found the nerve to face them as he had.

He was in a fever to get out, but did not forget Darby's warning, and accordingly took his time. Finally, he left the house and walked quietly down the street. A short distance away he noticed a policeman. He was made the recipient of a close survey, but he saw nothing in it to indicate that he was under watch, himself.

He wanted to hurry on, but curbed his impatience as much as possible. He was turning a corner when he chanced to look around, partially.

Another man was visible, following quietly after him.

Ordinarily, there would have been nothing in this circumstance to impress him, for it was an every-day occurrence, but precedent went for nothing, then. He decided that the man was dogging him and grew cautious.

The courage of the last encounter seemed to have deserted him, and he was weak as he tried to think how to evade the danger. A little experimenting showed his suspicion to be correct. He was being dogged, and some more fine work was demanded of him.

The hour was not yet so late that stores were closed, and acquaintance with one of these places enabled him to arrive at a decision. He entered by the front door, but his stay was short. Quickly passing out by the side door, he leaped upon a passing car and was soon rolling away.

Before he was out of sight he saw the spy come out on the sidewalk and stand looking up and down the street. He had been too late to detect the ruse, and was thoroughly thrown off the track.

Several days later three men were seated in a room on Charles street. One was Darby Westcott; another was a roughly-dressed person whose appearance would have been improved by a judicious use of a razor; the third was a man who had a look indicative of the detective profession.

Darby had brought out the cigars, and now that the last-named individual had his weed under way he commenced to talk.

"As I said before, I cannot report success. In fact, I am not prepared to encourage you in the idea of retaining me in the case."

"If there is light in it, I fail to see the light."

"I have been near Peter Robbins's home and talked with him and his neighbors. I did not find any of the latter that could help me materially, though I did establish the fact that Dick Hubbel had been there."

"He called upon Robbins. What took place I know not, for no outsider could aid me—or, if such persons could, they would not; and I made no great strike with Peter."

"He denies point blank that Hubbel had been near him. He was, in his way, talkative enough, and said he had a good many friends call on him. He denied, however, having any knowledge of Dick, and vowed that your case had not been brought before him in any way."

"Of course I was very careful in my remarks, and did not let on so he could harm you if he saw fit to go to the police, but I made him understand."

"Now, Robbins lied to me. Dick Hubbel was to see him. The evidence of the neighbors proves that, and we are left to confront the question: 'What has become of Dick, now?'"

The speaker ceased and there was silence. Neither of the other men was inclined to interrupt his dissection of the case.

"You, Drayton," he added, addressing the rough-looking member of the trio, "are the most competent to give an opinion. What have you to say?"

And disguised Vance Drayton replied:

"Dick Hubbel ran more risk than he knew when he went to Robbins. The paper he carried was a menace to Robbins and others, and there is no knowing what he would do. I don't know the man."

"He would bribe Hubbel to get out of the way, or—get him out in some other form!"

The suggestion was significant.

"If dead, where's Dick's body?" Darby asked.

"The river runs by New York!"

"Yes, but some distance away. Of course a body could be carted that far, but it would be some risk—in fact, a good deal of risk."

"There's a cellar under Robbin's house."

"Can it be got at?"

Silently the trio regarded each other. They were anxious to solve the mystery, not from any trivial motive, but because Vance Drayton's whole happiness and honor were at stake. And in doing it they must not only not consult the police, but must take every possible precaution not to let the police know of their work. It was not the easiest of tasks, as the detective proceeded to explain.

"Besides this," he added, "I take a good deal of risk in going into such an undertaking. I may get muddled up with the law and get myself generally disliked at Police Headquarters. Still, I won't back out of the job. Now for the plan. Who can give us one?"

Neither Darby nor Vance answered. It was not a matter where inspiration came in play, and the way looked dark. Nevertheless, they grappled with the conundrum in earnest, and ideas began to be evolved slowly and laboriously.

CHAPTER VI.

FIGHTING THEIR WAY.

THE Robbins house was dark and silent. Peter, his wife and their unamiable cubs were wrapped in slumber. Probably they slept peacefully, or it may be they were haunted with dreams of the cast-off son who had been such a thorn in their flesh until he was driven out. If so, their dreams could not have been pleasant—the truly good do not like to dream of the evil.

Down along the side of the house came a man who did not appear like an honest citizen of the court.

His movements were slow and stealthy; he watched for signs by the way, and for those who might be astir.

Seeing no such person he returned to the street and walked away. Five minutes later he was back, but not alone. With him were two other men, and all had the same secret manner which has been noted in him at first seen.

"Get to work!" urged one, who was easily recognized as Darby, and the voice of Vance Drayton added:

"Yes; lose no time!"

"Now, gents, don't get nervous," serenely returned the third person. "I've cracked cribs in my day before, an' I ain't goin' ter make no botch o' this job. I tole ye I was an expert, I did."

"Go on, Jim; manage the affair, yourself, but don't forget we can't help being nervous," Darby confessed.

"Keep cool, gents; keep cool!"

Jim had no trace of excitement, however others might be, and he went about his work with the utmost nonchalance. From his pocket he produced some kind of instrument, and with this began operations on the lock of the door. Darby and Vance watched him eagerly and anxiously. He was willing to keep them in suspense for awhile, to add to his own importance, but he had seen at first glance that the lock was not one to give him any great trouble.

When he saw fit he forced the bolt back; then he swung the door open.

"Now don't forget yer feet are big," he urged.

"The pinch has come. I can't save ye ef you fall all over yerself."

The caution was not necessary, but they took it without a word of remonstrance. Too much was at stake to quibble over small things.

Jim uncovered a bull's-eye lantern and looked around the kitchen.

"No prisoners an' no corpses here," he observed. "Toddle on, but do it as ef you're walkin' on eggs!"

The speaker was experienced in the line of work he advocated. Wise Darby had selected just the sort of aid who would do them the most good, and certificates of evil character were then more in demand than those of good reputation. Jim was an old cracksman, and his had been no vain boast when he said he knew his business.

He led the way, and room after room was visited. All had a vague hope that Dick Hubbel was held prisoner there. The visit to the various parts of the premises above ground was to settle that possibility.

On several occasions it nearly brought them to grief, for they saw sleeping members of the family, but Jim's skill and luck seemed limitless. Discovery did not follow.

At last the search, there, was ended.

"Now for the cellar!" announced the leader.

Vance breathed a sigh of relief. All this was very trying to his nerves. Honest and guiltless, he did not like the labor in which he was engaged, and he feared evil consequences would result. If discovered—the possibility made him shiver, and he felt easier now they were going where there seemed no great danger of it.

The house was old, and it had the cellar common to an earlier period of the city, the unpaved cellar of old times.

Jim looked around critically.

"Nobody visible here, but it ain't ter be expected. They would bury it right off, quick. Give us the spade!"

A small tool of the kind had been taken with them, and Jim seized this and went to work. It was plain that if the earth had been recently dug up, there must be a soft spot somewhere, and it was for this he now looked. The old cracksman was a valuable, if not an honest aid, and he earned his money. He found no such place as they were looking for, however.

A failure thus scored, they resorted to digging without regard to surface indications, and the ground was upheaved freely. When Jim tired, the others relieved him, and the cellar soon looked as if an earthquake had struck it.

Finally, Jim paused.

"Done!" he announced.

"How?"

"No use!"

"Do you mean we are to give up?"

"Notin' less!"

Vance and Darby exchanged uneasy glances.

"It's a losin' game," added the cracksman.

"Nobody has been buried here, and we only waste our time in tryin' ter locate it. See? The cue now is ter skip!"

"But all our work—"

"Shows you'll hev ter try some other plan. Ef Dick Hubbel has been done ter death, he ain't left in this place. You mark that!"

Silence followed the assertion. Both the others realized the apparent truth of what was said, but they were less ready to accept the evidence. If they gave up there, what remained?

Jim pointed upward.

"Shall we skip?"

Darby looked to Vance for the answer, and received it.

"We will go!"

No more was said. They prepared to depart, and were nearing the foot of the stairs when Jim suddenly stopped his companions.

"Listen!" he ordered.

They obeyed and had no need to ask questions.

"Somebody in the kitchen!" Darby exclaimed.

"We are heard!" Vance added.

"Perhaps not."

"It's likely we are," coolly remarked Jim.

"Are you's fellers ready fer a fight?"

"There must be no fight!" returned Vance, hurriedly.

"By gee! there will be, you bet!" Jim declared. "I didn't come here ter be gobbled. I'll fight, an' you'll do the same, ef you don't want me ter blow on ye dead. See?"

Pointed as his words were, they were more gentle than his manner. The nature of the man had flashed out, and he was like a tiger at that moment. His eyes blazed; he seemed to grow taller; his hands were clinched in the fury of defiance and hostility. It had been his way to fight in the past; it was his way still.

"Jim is right," Darby agreed. "Pete Robbins is a mere ruffian. Why should we let him bring us to ruin?"

"As you think best."

There was time to say no more. Robbins appeared at the head of the stairs, light in hand, and looked down. Jim had put out his own lantern. Robbins could see nothing. Darkness and silence were before him. Vance, for one, held his breath.

Peter was not satisfied. He began to descend the stairs, holding his light well in advance and using his eyes to the best advantage.

"Leave him to me," whispered Jim.

Vance would rather have done the work himself. He did not know to what length the old cracksman might go. Whether murder had been a part of his trade only himself knew.

Would there be fresh murder done?

Down came Peter. He set his foot on the ground. Then the shock came.

Like a tiger Jim leaped at him. Surely the experienced hands sought their objective point, and Robbins went down before the assault like a reed. One moment he was in an expectant mood; the next he was under the cracksman's knee.

"Done!" briefly commented Jim.

The term was both correct and

Peter was struggling fiercely, or trying to, but he did not make any visible progress toward escape, and not a word passed his lips.

A hand of iron was on his neck.

"Go up, all, and get ropes!" ordered Jim.

Robbins's light had fallen and gone out, but the two young men obeyed in the dark and soon reached the upper floor. It was not so easy to find the ropes, even when another light had been secured, and they were still busy when Jim suddenly appeared by their side.

"Stop work!" he directed, coolly. "We don't need the ropes!"

Even Darby was frightened.

"Heavens, man! have you killed him?" he gasped.

"Never mind; just get a hustle on and say nothing. Get out!"

The reply put both Jim's companions in a fresh panic, and they were only too glad to obey. It might have been a headlong rush had not the cracksman used his authority, as usual, and kept them in check. He got them out of the house in methodical style, and all were soon on the street.

"We won't stop to gossip with the policeman," dryly remarked Jim, "so if you find him you will please turn your faces toward Mother Earth and be mute."

He was full of airy confidence, but not even Darby tried to imitate him. No more was said until they were well away. Finally Jim came to a halt and proceeded to light a cigar.

"All safe now," he declared. "We did the act in the best of shape. I am truly sorry we didn't locate Dick Hubbel, but you must admit we got the bulge on Robbins in the prettiest fashion ever seen."

"Jim," asked Vance, in a low, unsteady voice, "did you kill that man?"

"I shut off his wind until he lay quiet. I didn't examine him, *post-mortem*, or *ante-mortem*."

Vance was freshly horrified. Perhaps murder had been done, in which case he had new troubles to meet, and fresh dangers to fear. It was a severe blow, for he had been congratulating himself that in the whole miserable business he had never gone contrary to law. He could have that consolation no longer.

Darby broke a thoughtful silence.

"Drayton, your immediate future is fixed. You must hang to your disguise, and your success is now a matter of time—if it comes at all!"

CHAPTER VII.

NEW PERIL.

FOUR months later.

A North River pier at night.

A man stood near the head of the structure, looking down into the water. He was thus occupied when footsteps sounded behind him. He turned quickly—so quickly that the start seemed suggestive of a mind not at ease. Before him stood only a boy, and the fact appeared to reassure him.

"Say, mister," spoke the new-comer, "you seem ter be in love with the drink down below."

"How is that?"

"You looked long and tender. Honest, now, you don't think o' takin' a bath that'll last ye the rest o' yer life, do ye? Even corpses ain't free from trouble under the present laws o' New York, fer a corpse that has killed itself is arrested immediate, an' is liable ter be sent up fer ten days or more."

"Be at ease; I do not contemplate suicide. I was looking at the water, but not with a view of testing its dampness. No; I am not a suicide, in fact or intention."

"Good! I don't believe in that sort o' thing, by gum!"

"Yet, suicide ends this world's troubles," added the man, thoughtfully. "It ends all—ends all!"

"There is a flea buzzin' in yer mind, general."

"Trouble I may have, but I don't contemplate anything rash. Your interest in the case is kind, however. May I ask who you are?"

"It won't cost you a cent. Ef there is any one thing I ain't, it's that I ain't mean. Generous to a fault, I had as soon tell you my name as not. I am Caleb Jones, sometimes called Cast-off Caleb."

"The last part, at least, is peculiar. Why 'Cast-off' Caleb?"

"Because I hev a vacation from the haunts which once knew me well. There was a time, my frien', when I was a pampered child o' luxury. I was the son o' parents rich an' tender-hearted. All they could do for me was cheerfully done. Gold fairly overflowed my pockets, an' wore my suspenders out with the weight

"I eat off of silver dishes an' had raspberry jam three times a day. Servants waited at my beck an' nod, an' I nodded reg'lar as the pipin' o' the whistles on the old North River."

"Why this change?"

"Base ingratitude!"

"On whose part?"

"Mine!"

"Toward your parents?"

"Yes! Kind stranger, let me lean on your southwest shoulder, while I weep a select few of bitter tears."

Cast-off Caleb did not seem anxious to carry out his own plan of weeping, so his companion measured his humorous air against it and decided that it was all a joke.

"You seem to have borne up well under the cross."

"I feel that I ought to endure the results of my sins meekly."

"Your parents may take you back, yet."

"Not ef I know it!" exclaimed Caleb, with some haste. "I don't want ter contaminate my innocent brothers—poor little lambs! what ain't no idee of the sin that's in the world, except what I showed them before."

"You appear to be an odd kind of a chap."

"Tolerable. Mister, what is your handle?"

"Amos Allen."

"Eh?"

The name was repeated.

"Say, gosh ter fish-hooks! be you the feller who's goin' ter be done up?"

"Done up? What do you mean?"

"Well, I've heerd of a feller who's in that way. I wanted ter see him, but didn't know where he lived, so I couldn't very well find him. See? You must be the chap, I guess. D'ye know a certain gal named Madge Ellis, *ter wit, et cetera*?"

"I do know the young lady you mention."

"An' a feller named Norris Farley, a policeman's son?"

"There is such a person."

"I should smile. Yes; there is such a person, an' ef you don't get your best wiggle on, he will do you up the brownest you was ever done up in yer life. That's his programme, anyhow, an' ef it don't miscarry he will chuck you inter the great beyond so effectually that when you get out of it your name will be Dennis Mud. See?"

"Be so kind as to explain," urged Amos.

"Sure! You see, I chanced ter overhear this Norris Farley talkin' with a tough whom he called Bliff, an' he hired Bliff ter do ye up. I can't say fer sure, but as I understood it, he meant ter kill you. Anyhow, Bliff gave his promise positive that you should never appear to do him harm again. You see, Norris claimed you had made Madge give him the dead shake, an' you'd got her fer yer own 'honey.'"

"This is interesting."

"It won't be ef Bliff falls athwart yer physical bein' an' bu'sts you a lick in the corporal part o' yer statue!" candidly declared Caleb.

"My young friend, I am very much obliged for your information. As you know so much I will admit that the actions of Norris Farley have given me some grounds to suspect he did not admire me very much—"

"Why should he, when you stole his honey?" Now, I've got a 'honey'—Betty Dow, is her aristocratic name—an' I s'pose I should jes' about tear my shirt off ef anybody should steal her!"

"Not so fast, Caleb. There has been no stealing. I do know Miss Madge Ellis, but all my dealings with her have been above-board. If she sees fit to talk with me, what has Norris Farley to do with that?"

Caleb scratched his head seriously.

"Mister, there are cases an' cases. Ef anybody stole Betty Dow I would make sech a row that the alley would shake from stem ter stern, an' Peter—that's my male parent; my lovin' pop—would jest think the prodigal son was on deck like a tramp after a free lunch."

"Should you try to kill him?"

"My friend, you don't jest know me, I reckon. Do I look like an exsassinator? Observe any gleam of blood in my eye? My good sir, I ain't built like that. Nary! I pass! But to resume: I was about ter say that, havin' seen you an' Norris, both, I think Madge shows good sense in cleavin' ter you an' givin' him the dead shake. Sech bein' the case, I change my mind on this especial instance of best girl biz, an' hope you have one that does you proud. Shake!"

The eccentric boy gravely extended his hand, and Amos did not refuse the offer. He thought he had begun to understand his companion, and realized that he had found an acquaintance out of the common run of mankind. Having established friendly relations, he soon asked:

"Did you not learn anything about the plan to be adopted by this man Bliff, whoever he is, to carry out his employer's orders?"

"Oh! cert! He's ter come ter your room an' do ye up unless, which they didn't think likely, but I don't see the point, they could find ye on the street at night. Norris said he didn't think you could be ketched out, then, but here you be now, anyhow."

"No definite time or place, then?"

"No."

Amos mused.

"Strange!" he murmured.

"What is?"

"Nothing!"

It was not a very comprehensive reply, yet it meant enough to Amos Allen. As the reader has suspected, he was Vance Drayton in disguise—not as a negro, now, but a wearer of humble clothes, and a mover in humble circles, and no longer the neat Vance of old. Casual survey might not have revealed to even his old acquaintances that he was one they knew.

His life had not been happy in the last few months. He had been constantly in fear of being found by the police, for he knew they were searching for him. Darby had escaped suspicion, and was so situated as to be able to watch matters somewhat, but all his care found little that was encouraging.

To the police, Vance's disappearance was very mysterious, but they did not despair of finding him.

That they were searching was sure; whether they had any clew Darby had no means of knowing.

The only thing which consoled the fugitive was the fact that Robbins had not died under Jim's rough hand. The former had been choked into insensibility, but had fully recovered.

Unknown to Vance he was now talking with Robbins's son. The fact left no clew, then; like himself, Cale had discarded his old name, and the new one did not reveal Peter's son.

The boy watched his companion closely and silently for a time, but the lull grew irksome.

"What are you goin' ter do about it?" he asked, abruptly.

"I can't make an assault on Norris Farley, to head off his own, so I can see no way but to keep quiet and try to beat his man Bliff out, when he comes."

"Say, that ain't my way. I should say, get a wiggle on and go fer him right off! The feller who gits the first blow in a scrimmage is the best off, an' don't you forget it. See?"

"There is logic in that, but I don't aspire to have any scrimmage."

"You'll hev it, jest the same!"

Cale showed his disappointment plainly, but accepted the verdict and let it go at that. They talked for some time, the conversation being of a general nature, and Vance grew more and more pleased with his new friend. Cale's manner appealed to him in various ways, and he gained such a favorable opinion that he decided that the acquaintance ought to be kept up.

He broached the subject. Caleb heard him with great gravity.

"It shall be as you say. I ain't in the habit of makin' promiscuous friendships, but I reckon you are all correct. Put it there, old man! I shall be proud ter see ye often!"

"I hope your wealthy relatives will not have cause to disapprove of your decision."

"Since they have cast me off I haven't kept them very well posted, nohow. A few postal-cards each day has been all the acquaintance we hev had!" drily answered Cale. "Don't worry erbout them; I don't!"

The piers had lost their charm for Vance, and he and Cale wandered away from the river, and toward the house where the former now made his home. The boy did not go entirely to the place; he had promised Vance to watch for new points, and as a known friend he would be hampered in the task.

Entering alone, Vance went to his room. It was a humble home, in keeping with the business which now gave him a living, the clothing he wore, and the manners he assumed. It had, however, been a safe refuge, so far, and certain things had been the result of the time passed there which made him not wholly sorry he had entered its limits when he did.

Sitting down he fell into thought, and not of a pleasant kind, either. He had fresh foes, and dangers to contend with, now.

CHAPTER VIII.

DEFENDING AMOS.

THE boarding-house where Vance lived was kept by a Mrs. Ellis. She had one child; a

daughter named Madge. On the afternoon of the day following the scenes last described Madge was alone in the parlor.

The bell rung, and she answered it herself. A boy was there who at once fixed a sharp look upon her.

"Be you Madge?" he asked, abruptly.

"That is my name," she returned.

"Then it's you I want to see. Thank you; I will walk in!"

She had said nothing about such a step, but his manner, though a trifle colored with audacity, was not offensive, and she did not object. People of queer ways were common in that section of the city. This visitor found the best chair in the room, and sat down with calm ease.

"I'm Caleb Jones!" he announced.

"And who is Caleb Jones?" Madge inquired, smiling.

"Didn't ye ever hear o' me?"

"Never!"

"Then you wouldn't know who I was ef I told ye. Nobody is ginerally famous in New York unless he keeps a saloon, or is a hustler on election day at buyin' up voters. A man built that way is more famous in town than the mayor—unless he happens ter be a saloon-keeper or vote-buyer, himself!"

"Is that what you came here to tell me?"

"No, it ain't, an' I'll proceed ter the other biz. You're in love with Amos Allen!"

The announcement was made in a very matter-of-fact way, but to Madge it was as sudden as it was remarkable, and it was no wonder she blushed quite vividly.

"Indeed! and who has been telling you anything of that kind?" she demanded.

"Norris Farley. At least, I heard him say so ter another feller."

"Mr. Farley had better mind his own affairs!" Madge retorted.

"You never spoke truer, by jinks! How true you've spoke you don't fully know. Say, be you aware that when you preferred Amos ter him you set a rascal's mind ter work in the very liveliest way?"

"What do you mean?"

"Ef Policeman Farley would look ter his own son he would get track of about the biggest knave in all New York, by jinks! I've warned Amos ter look a good deal out, but I didn't know so much as I do now. Say, will you believe it, the scamp has put up a job ter get Amos done up cold, an' ef you don't mind yer eye it will work for keeps. Miss, you an' me want ter go right up ter Amos's room an' upset the whole biz!"

Madge had no idea what the boy was talking about, but his manner was so impressive that she had no cause to doubt that something was afoot.

"Explain what you mean, quickly!" she cried, her face revealing the agitation of her mind.

"Foller me!"

Cale rose, and she obeyed mechanically, not stopping to remember he was a total stranger to her. At his bidding she led the way to Vance's room, and there the boy got to work at once.

He pulled open a drawer and swept out the contents.

"See anything there which don't belong ter Amos?" he asked.

"Why, several of those things are Mr. Bacon's!"

"Who is he?"

"He has the best room, on the first floor."

"Kin he be in the plot?"

"No; it is impossible."

"I'm on! It's the idea to rope in an honest man, so it will look more plausible. Cunnin' scheme! Do you think it'll work?"

"I don't understand what it is. Tell me, at once! I am frightened. I want to understand this. Speak out!"

"The plot is to make Amos out a thief, an' do it by findin' these things in his possession. Farley planned it, but it ain't likely he will appear in it, himself. He has got some gallus detective ter do the job, an' you an' me is all that stands between Amos an' destruction. Kin we save him?"

Cale was cool, but Madge could not bring herself to that point. She was not surprised to find that Norris Farley was a knave, but the boldness of this scheme startled her.

"What shall we do?" she demanded, helplessly.

"First of all, get this stuff back where it belongs. Hustle!"

The speaker gathered up all he could hold, and another command caused Madge to lead the way. Everything was restored to its proper

place as soon and neatly as possible. Then they went once more to Amos's room.

"How was this mischief done?" the girl inquired, as her agitation subsided somewhat.

"As I understand it, Norris don't live in this house?"

"He does not."

"Then he got somebody ter do it fer him. I don't know who—mebbe you kin guess?"

"I cannot."

Caleb was still searching to make sure nothing had escaped his notice, when the door-bell rung. Madge started nervously.

"That's them!" declared Cale.

"Who?"

"The dishonest detective an' his heelers!"

Madge changed color, a fact which did not escape her companion's notice.

"Now, you see here!" he exclaimed; "you want ter get yer courage up. Show that look ter them sharks an' they will know right away you are scared, an' ef they see that, they will suspect more. You've got ter grow courageous!"

"I will!"

Madge thought of Amos, and her resolution surprised herself as well as Cale. The door-bell rung once more.

"I'll go down," she remarked, steadily.

"All right; but, see here: I'm ter be explained, ef necessary. I am your boy-of-all-work. Ef anybody comes in that is up on affairs in the house, you hev jest engaged me. See?"

"Yes."

Madge felt that her load was being increased, but she was ready for anything now.

She went down, and Cale kept her company. He paused near the head of the basement stairs while she opened the door. Two men of official appearance stood there. The foremost bowed stiffly.

"My name is Gilson, and I am a detective," he remarked, in a straightforward way. "I wish to search in this house. Here is the warrant, madam."

Madge looked only at the man.

"What do you wish to search for?" she asked, and the calmness of her utterance surprised herself.

"Examination of the paper will show that it is the room of Mr. Amos Allen we desire to see."

"He is not in, sir."

Gilson smiled at what he regarded as the simplicity of her reply.

"We are aware of that fact, but it does not count now. It is the room, not the man, we wish to see."

"For what reason, sir?"

"To search it. Further than that I have no explanation to make at present. The warrant gives me the right, and I do not need to go into particulars."

Gilson spoke in a domineering way, but Madge was not obliged to answer. Caleb Jones came forward serenely.

"That asseveration is about the figger," he admitted. "The majesty o' the law is bound up in this gent's vest-pocket, an' what he don't represent you can't get this side o' the President's chair, in Washington. Obey yer superiors, mum!"

The detective thought he saw a sneer, and a desire to belittle himself, and he sharply demanded:

"Who are you, youngster?"

"I reckon I'm not any small toad in the puddle. I hev the honor ter be the builder o' fires, an' sech important things, in this mansion. I'm no slouch, though I may look it. I'm a blue-blooded aristocrat, reduced by circumstances to a menial position. Still, I'm about as far on the 'way-up trail as any one I know of. Certificates o' character don't go with the advertisement, but it's a paid 'ad.,' an' the best men in town can't give no better sign manual."

"If you know what you mean, I don't," Gilson confessed. "Still, it don't matter, an' you can attend to your fires and furnaces to your heart's content. Lead the way to the man's room!"

The last order was to Madge, and she was ready to obey it. Cale's composure had proved infectious, and she began to hope for the best. She was, however, enough of a student of human nature to see that Gilson was a fellow of very low principles.

Fate was, indeed, unkind, when not even the poor consolation of meeting an honest officer was granted to those whom he had come to put on the rack.

Once in the room Gilson went to work. He knew the art of turning things topsy-turvy in the so-called discharge of his duty, and proceed-

ed to make himself and companion very prominent.

Cale winked to Madge, to give her courage, and then sat down on the edge of the bed. He imagined that all the evidence was out of the way, and was deriving a vast amount of pleasure from the supposed fact that Gilson was to be so signally defeated.

As the men searched Caleb used his eyes, and he soon found something worth looking at. An object was slightly protruding from the edge of the bed, next to the mattress, and he stared hard when he saw it. It changed the whole aspect of affairs.

Glancing slyly at the officers, he then introduced his hand and brought the article out a trifle.

It was as he had believed; he held a piece of silk goods, and its appearance showed it to be perfectly new.

He had been led to suspect there would be more in the supposed thief's possession than what belonged to the lodger below, and he quickly caught on to the fact, now, that this was a part of the false evidence. Moreover, if it was found, all his past efforts would go for nothing.

"I've got to get it out o' sight!" thought the boy, anxiously. "But how kin it be done?"

He realized that he could not place it elsewhere, and that he would not be allowed to leave the room, so but one way occurred to him. Once more he glanced quickly at the searchers. Their backs were toward him.

With a single motion he pulled the tell-tale sign out, and then strove to thrust it up under his vest.

The thing was larger than he had anticipated, and it was no easy job. It stuck fast and he struggled desperately. The effort made him grow red in the face, and his eyes had a wild gleam as he watched the men. Would time enough be allowed him?

One last attempt he made; then Gilson turned and confronted him squarely. The detective spoke quickly.

CHAPTER IX.

VANCE SEES AN OLD FOE.

"HAS anybody been to this bureau?"

Sharply Gilson asked the question, and it looked very much as if he had failed to find some particular object he had had reason to believe would be there. He had chanced to look first at Caleb, for he was not sure where either he or Madge stood, but he immediately transferred his attention to the latter.

Caleb's idea that he was detected was proved erroneous by the incident, and he found another reprieve. The silk was under his vest, but in such a position that it made him resemble an inflated balloon. As it then was it seemed certain to draw attention, and he made haste to arrange it.

Some of the inequalities were eradicated while Gilson was talking with Madge, but Cale found he had taken a decided load.

He looked as corpulent as a politician of his own ward.

"I am not satisfied with the state of affairs here," Gilson confessed. "I think somebody has been tampering with things which don't belong to him. Boy, do you know anything about it?"

Now, attention was certainly upon the corpulent youth, but he hollowed in his stomach and met it coolly.

"I dunno what you're talkin' about," he answered.

"Do you work here?"

"Ef it ain't work, by gum! I'm gettin' a wrong idee of it. I don't want ter kick when the boss is around—" he motioned to Madge—"but it's mighty clear ter me that I don't draw two dollars a week fer bein' good-lookin'. Yes; I work here!"

"Takes you a long while to say it!" Gilson snapped. "Have you been in this room before, to-day?"

"No, sir," replied Cale, unblushingly.

"Nor taken anything out?"

"Me? Wal, I guess not! The time I took the feller's flask o' prime old Bourbon out I was set down on so heavy that I ain't done much in that line sence."

Gilson walked toward the bed and began to haul it to pieces. He was on the very ground where Cale had made his discovery, and the latter was more than ever impressed with the fact that he had had a close call. The silk did not feel comfortable under his vest, and its prominence to the eye made him fear that the hump would be seen by others.

He decided to get out of the room, but was brought to a halt by a sharp command from Gilson:

"Stay where you are! Nobody can leave this place until I give permission!"

"Great guns!" Cale exclaimed, with his usual airiness, "be we shet up as state prisoners? Wal, let 'er go, Isaac; I always did hanker fer notoriety an' glory!"

The assertion was not heeded by the officers, who were busy with the search. The bed was torn to pieces, but nothing was found there which could injure Amos Allen or any one else. The effect of this failure on Gilson was very clear to be seen. He looked like a man who had lost a personal case, and his best friend with it.

Satisfied, at last, that nothing was to be gained by any such investigation, Gilson relaxed his prying air and turned again to the lady and boy. What he had to say was not said then, however. Footsteps sounded at the door and another man entered. Cale grew aghast.

It was "Amos Allen!"

Plainly, the latter had not expected to see anybody there, and he came to a halt near the door and looked with earnest attention.

Gilson had his eyes open, too.

"Who is this?" he demanded, suspiciously.

Cale made a gesture behind the detective's back, and Amos was not slow to understand why the men were present.

"My name is Allen," he announced, boldly, "and I am the tenant of this room. May I ask what the rest of you are doing in it? I believe my rent is fully paid, Miss Ellis. I hope I am not to be ousted for somebody who may not pay at all?"

"Spare your insolence!" retorted Gilson, sharply. "I don't want this room, nor any other which you are likely to occupy in the immediate future. Young man, we are officers of law, and here to search your quarters."

"I should say you have done it!" and Amos gazed at the upheaved area with an air of disgust.

"We have not found that for which we came."

"No? What do you want?"

"You are believed to be anything but an honest man, and that's what brought us here. I confess our effort has not satisfied us, thus far. It may, later."

Cale had not ceased to make gestures behind Gilson's back, all of which had a voice for Amos, and he began to suspect that the boy had made good his promise of aid. Amos knew he was in danger, but, though he did not understand it fully, he was keeping a bold front.

All the while he had found something in the detective which was very familiar, though he did not succeed in placing the familiarity. As Gilson ceased speaking, however, he crossed the room and went close to the window, thus bringing himself into strong light. This was enough; he was seen and recognized by Amos.

The detective was the same who had figured in the event when Amos was Vance Drayton, and from whom he had so narrowly escaped by assuming the disguise as a colored man.

It was a severe shock, and suggested that Gilson had again struck the old trail, though this notion was soon abandoned.

Gilson stood in silence, betraying his vexation, and there he meditated for some time. Finally, he turned around abruptly. He had something to say, but the words were not spoken.

His gaze became fixed on Vance's face, and he looked puzzled and uncertain.

"Where have I seen you before?" he demanded.

Vance's regard did not waver.

"Really, I can't say," he responded, coolly.

"Your face is familiar."

"Mebbe you're long-lost twin brothers," suggested Cale. "Ef sech proves ter be the fact, let me take ye about the country an' exhibit ye at dime museums. We'd make a boodle out of it, b'jinks!"

"Silence, boy!" Gilson added.

"All right, old hoss!"

"Some kids need to have their ears slapped!" exclaimed the detective, scowling.

"Some folks ain't big enough ter do it!" Cale coolly retorted.

Gilson saw he would make nothing by talking with such a ready opponent, and again turned his attention to Vance. The vague resemblance which he saw filled him with doubt and uncertainty. He felt that for some reason he ought to know more of the man, and be interested in him, but the cause did not appear.

"Have you always lived near here?" he asked.

"Well, I've lived all my days in New York, but not in this house, certainly. Boarding-house men are prone to swing around the circle, you know."

"Your name is Amos Allen?"

"Yes."

Gilson meditated, and then gave it up.

"This is not the business which brought me here. I have other things to do. Miss," to Madge, "I want to see under this carpet. Boy, strip off your coat and tear it up!"

"What?"

"Didn't you hear?"

"I imagine I did, but ter hear an' ter do is two different things. I ain't no carpet-fiend, an' don't banker ter be. I pass!"

Cale folded his arms over the silk which was in his coat, and tried to imagine the situation if he took off that coat and let Gilson see what was under it. He wondered, too, that the detective did not notice his sudden corpulency, and proceeded to investigate it.

Gilson could not very well demand what had been refused him, so he took the next best way and proceeded to tear up the carpet, himself. Naturally, Vance objected and demanded an explanation, and between what was said to him, and the secret but expressive winks of his ally, Cale, he gained a very good idea of what was under way, though he had no notion of how he had been saved, or how close the call was.

The detective found nothing, and had to give up the quest in disgust.

He took another look at Vance, and wondered over the resemblance he felt he ought to grasp, but could not, and then prepared to go away, his manner curt and ungracious.

No one wished to delay him, and he was soon out of the house with his companion.

Then Vance was quickly made aware of the whole case as far as Cale knew it.

"It's all a plot of Norris Farley's!" he exclaimed.

"Sure!" Cale agreed. "He's bound ter do ye up ef it's in the books. Wal, with what Madge an' I can now tell, ye ought ter pull through a middlin' big storm, ef yer past record is good."

Vance winced.

"I have done nothing at any time of my life to be ashamed of," he responded.

"Good! I haven't either, but hereafter I mean ter be ez mean ez they make 'em. Look at old Gilson! He toils not, neither does he spin, yet he gets a good livin' by bein' a darned skunk! An' don't he size up pretty! Oh! he's a jewel, he is; hang his measly old mug!"

CHAPTER X.

LISTENING TO GOOD PURPOSE.

CALE stood on a street corner, that evening, watching for something with unusual intentness. A young man came out of the house near at hand and started down the street. His first appearance had made Cale's eyes gleam, and he at once fell in behind him and followed where he led, attentive but unseen by the man.

The journey took them to Union Square, and in the Park the man found an acquaintance.

The two shook hands and sat down on a bench.

Cale let nothing slip him. The second person was Detective Gilson, and it was clear that the first was Norris Farley. This was what the boy had expected, but it was not enough for his purpose to merely see they had met.

He wished to get near enough to overhear what was being said, and this he hastened to do. It was no easy task, though the place in which they had seated themselves was very much in his favor. He maneuvered to get within listening distance, and succeeded better than was to be expected.

He first caught these words:

"That plan has failed. What next?"

It was Gilson who spoke, and Farley replied:

"Something must be done, at once. I am in deep waters. You are a good enough friend, Gilson, so I feel sure I can speak out freely if you are a detective."

"Detective he hanged! That's my calling, but I'm out for the 'stuff!' I don't care a rap what becomes of the police work, as long as I get my own hoodle!"

"Good! If all the detectives were like you there would be a good deal less trouble in New York City."

"Fact, b'mighty!" muttered Cale, under his breath. "Oh! you're a great old pair, you be!"

"I have all along told you that Madge Ellis had no money, now, or in prospect," went on Farley. "This is strictly true, but there's more to it. Poor as she is, she may yet bring money to the man who marries her. My reasons for wishing to make her my wife are as follows:

"First, she is as pretty as a dream of heaven;

second, she may bring money remotely; third, it would, perhaps, reconcile me to my father. Not that I care for him, but he used to support me, and I wish he would do it again.

"There is a little history in which Madge distinctly figures, though she doesn't know of the fact at all."

"There were once two men named Avery and Proctor. They were friends and well to do. Both went into business, but not together. Avery failed. Proctor was prospering, so he took Avery in with him, and tried to give him a start in life, but it was no go.

"Avery had the poor taste to die.

"He was a widower with one child—"

"Madge?" inquired Gilson.

"Nobody else. It would surprise her to know it, but so it is. She does not suspect that her name is anything else than Ellis, but the woman she is now with was only the old family servant.

"Proctor undertook to rear her, but a sister of her dead mother appeared on the scene and succeeded in getting control of her. Proctor gave her up very unwillingly, but as he had no legal right to her, and he was promised the privilege of seeing her frequently, he let her go.

"Her new protector was no angel, and after a quarrel she shortly had with Proctor, she took the child and skipped for parts unknown. Why she did this when she had but little money, and Proctor had much, would have surprised some folks to understand.

"The reason was not deep when got at.

"In trying to settle Avery's old affairs Proctor had found things not only muddled, but in such shape that if he let all go as the law appeared to require, the Avery interests would have suffered severely.

"He'd done some nice work—not what the law would admire if it knew the whole story, but what his conscience told him was right. Here Avery's wife's sister came in. She had put a few dollars into the business, herself, and was bound to get it at all hazards. She did so, but at Proctor's expense.

"When she was gone it was found she had mixed matters up so that he had a heavy load to bear.

"Before dropping him I will say he never pulled out of the Avery trouble. He made a temporary shift, and got things arranged so he could stave off the crash by paying in a little each year to satisfy creditors. He hoped to fix all, finally, but went from bad to worse, and after having the drag on himself for eighteen years, found, a few months ago, that he must skip out or stand trial for alleged illegal work in connection with the case.

"He skipped, and may still be running.

"Madge was kept in hiding by her aunt until the latter died, when she passed into the hands of a woman who had once been a servant in the Avery household—namely, Mrs. Ellis.

"Now, Proctor may be able to get on his feet again, after all. If he does, there is money in it for Madge. His estate is out of his hands, and out of those of his relatives—all gone, just now—but let them get themselves together and it will be a turn-about. They are well fixed in right, if not in fact. I think they'll square away, yet.

"If old Proctor gets there, we have only to produce Madge and he will do well by her."

Norris finished, but Gilson shook his head.

"I can't see clear in this."

"Of course you can't. Were I to explain all, you and I would be here when the sparrows get up in the morning. It is the history of years, and can't be told in a breath. Let it suffice that I have given you an outline."

"How did you learn this?"

"Excuse me if I don't tell."

"I may be able to help."

"Perhaps I'll call on you later."

"Why not now?"

"I want to get it in shape."

Gilson looked ugly. Ever ready to feather his own nest, he had conceived the idea of working into the game independently, and in that way best calculated to help himself. Farley was too shrewd to trust him, and that put Mr. Gilson in a quandary. He lacked the clew to begin upon, and was not likely to feather his nest without it.

"If Proctor is out of the swim, I don't see how you are going to do anything in that quarter," he grumbled.

"He may have an inning, yet. Then, again, he has a son who may chip in."

"Why not deal with the son?"

"I would try it, but I don't know where he is."

"Can't he be traced?"

"I have not been able to do it. He is almost as much compromised, I am told, as his father. Of course he is man-grown, and for some years he had helped the old man in all business matters. Result, he is in hiding, somewhere, himself."

"He ought to be found."

"True."

"Suppose I do it?"

"We will let it rest for the time. What I now want of you is to get Amos Allen out of the way. He has got Madge bewitched, and unless it can be broken up, I shall settle this case only to see Allen run off with the prize."

"Have you a plan?"

"Not now. Our scheme to have him proven a thief has failed, and it would be madness to try the same trick again. Some other way must be thought of. Let it go for a day or two, and I'll then spring a new idea on you."

"You may lose by delay."

Norris did not answer at once, but he suddenly exclaimed:

"I can't see how that game failed, before?"

"There was a reason for it," Gilson responded.

"It is clear that some one was dead onto us. Allen was late in coming into the room, but it may be it was all arranged. At the same time, I am more inclined to suspect Miss Ellis and the boy. That kid has an eagle eye, as the expression is. He is a street boy in the full sense of the term, and that means, the school of adversity has given him shrewdness beyond his years. It would not surprise me if he was solely responsible for our failure, though how he got on to our game I can't conceive. But there are many ways for one so sharp."

Caleb grinned with satisfaction.

Such praise from an enemy was not unpleasant.

"We ought to have strangled the young whelp!" Norris exclaimed.

"We may need to do it, yet."

Cale felt of his neck, and grinned again. Not yet did he feel the touch of a strangler's hand, and he hoped to avoid having practical knowledge of how it seemed.

The men had said all they had to exchange, and they soon separated.

"Which shall I follow?" wondered Cale.

He looked after them for several seconds—then it occurred to him there was no good reason why he should follow either.

"I'll see Amos, instead," he decided. "All this will interest him. Ef Madge is what Farley stated, an' she don't know it, an' nobody else does, it's time some good man told her of it. Here goes!"

He started off briskly, and never let up on the pace until he arrived at his destination. He found Amos in, and proceeded to spring his new discoveries with his usual impetuosity.

"Say, old chap, you're in luck!"

"Am I?" Amos repeated. "Well, you've brought me what is news, indeed. May I ask where the 'luck' comes in? I have not yet been able to see it."

"I'm here as an elocidator. Madge is an heiress!"

Amos looked disappointed.

"That is doubtless pleasant for her, but may I inquire how this is in any degree good news for me?"

"Why, you'll scoop her in, don't you see?"

"I'm not in the business of 'scooping in' heiresses!" tartly replied the listener.

"Now I think of it, I believe she isn't one, but it's about the same thing. She has friends, who, if they kin get on their feet, themselves, an' kin find her, an'—seems ter me there is more 'ifs,' though I can't grapple them, off-hand—will possibly make her a gal o' money. This don't sound very strong the way I put it, but it's what has been eating Norris Farley, Esquire. It's because o' this he's bound ter marry her, himself, an' won't tolerate no rival; an' it's why he tried ter do you up so hijious!"

"Are you sure this isn't a fairy story?"

"It may be, fer Madge is a good deal o' the fairy order, but ef you mean ter doubt the truth of it, you're all wrong. It's correct, fer I heerd Norris whisper it to Gilson."

"Explain yourself!"

CHAPTER XI.

MUTUAL SURPRISES.

"WELL, I've been doing the great detective act, an' when I do it I never get left," Cale modestly replied. "I've listened ter private confabs between the toughs an' Tartars, an' this is the result. As I said before, Madge ain't no heiress in her own right, but once let the Proctor family get on their feet again, an' she is likely ter be 'way up in 'G.'"

Amos had started up from his chair, his face expressive of excitement.

"What's that?" he cried.

"What's *what*?"

"The name you used."

"I was talkin' o' Madge."

"Yes, yes; but the other name. What family did you say?"

"Oh! Proctor."

"What do you know of them?"

"Nothin', only wot Norris said."

"And what did he say? Come, speak out; speak quickly. You may have struck a mine, boy! Proctor? But there are thousands of the name. It cannot be the same. It is impossible."

"I don't recollect jest now that I heerd his name mentioned any more fully, but he was one who used ter hev a friend named Avery, an' Madge is Avery's daughter—"

"What?"

Amos had settled down resolved to be calm, but as he thus interrupted Cale he again sprung up and regarded the speaker in amazement.

"Say, general," inquired Caleb, solicitously, "you ain't been imbibing nothin' too strong fer your equilibrium, hev you?"

"Do you tell me all this in seriousness?"

"Nothin' shorter."

"And you assert that Madge is Avery's daughter?"

"So Norris said."

"But it's impossible. Her mother, Mrs. Ellis, still lives, and the other woman died long ago."

"Yes, an' then Mrs. Ellis took her an' brung her up as her kid. Madge prob'ly ain't no idee o' the facts o' the case, but ef you question the old lady, you may be able to get at the mystery somewhat. See?"

Amos sat down again, and in a quiet way he directed:

"Be so good as to tell me all you heard, and in a manner as clear as possible."

Caleb did not object, and the story was soon under way. Straight to the end he went until the last words were spoken. Then his companion knew all he had so luckily overheard. Amos had asked several questions, but had not revealed enough interest so but that it was a great surprise when he commented at the close:

"There may be much truth in this. That there is some I am well aware. Farley mentioned that the elder Proctor had a son. I am that son!"

"Great guns!"

It was Cale's turn to be surprised, and he stared blankly at his friend. Then he abruptly demanded:

"How many names hev you got?"

A transient smile flitted across the young man's face.

"Only four—Ralph Proctor, Vance Drayton, Allen Barnes and Amos Allen."

"You've got all o' them?"

"I have."

"Then, b'gosh! I guess you ain't so much of an angel as I'd set you down ter be!" Cale exclaimed.

"Slowly, my friend! Don't you commit the error which others have made, and do me injustice. I am not one you need hesitate to take by the hand as a friend. My record is clear, if I do say it. As Ralph Proctor, trying to get the tangled affairs of my father and Mr. Avery in shape, I got into hot water through no fault of my own. To save myself from unjust arrest I have used various false names, but not one deed stands to my credit of which I am ashamed."

The manly declaration had due effect. Cale reached over and grasped the other's hand.

"Put it there, general! I've seen the fancy the world has fer jumpin' on folks with spikes in their shoes, an' I kin feel fer another feller, you bet. Put it there!"

The hand was not refused.

"All you have told me about the business affairs of Avery and Proctor was of course, known to me, before," observed Amos, presently, "and far more; but one thing amazes me. Can it really be that Madge Ellis is the long-lost daughter of Mr. Avery?"

"Wal, you know Norris's say-so."

Vance deliberated.

"If this is true the road to success would be brightened by a hope, but I see no such hope anywhere. Once, I seemed on the point of getting the desired clew and, consequently, means of relief, but all went to smash. There was only one man who could have saved the cause, and what became of him I know not. Only one person can tell."

"Who is he?"

"A man named Peter Robbins."

"Who?" cried Cale.

"Peter Robbins, is his name."

"Where does he live?"

"In an alley off of Houston street."

"Great guns!"

"Do you know him?"

"A young feller I am slightly acquainted with had a trifle o' experience with Peter, once," grimly answered the Cast-off. "But what does Peter know about your case? I'd like ter know."

"He was concerned with men who were instrumental in defeating my purposes, and doubtless did his share to harm me, though his motive was only that of money paid him by others. Later, he became more concerned in the matter, unless I am very much in error. Indeed, I suspect Robbins of making way with one upon whom I relied to prove my innocence of all this."

"When did Peter do it?"

The question did not seem to call for any great amount of exactness, but something impelled Vance to reply thoughtfully:

"It was the tenth day of last March."

Cale meditated for a moment.

"Great guns!" he then exclaimed.

"Young man, what do you mean by all these questions and ejaculations?" Vance demanded.

"One would think you knew Robbins, or—"

"I do know him a trifle," admitted Cale.

"In what way?"

"Oh! he's a father o' mine!"

"He is what?"

"Only my father."

"Surely, you are jesting."

"Not an atom. The name I give you at our first meetin' was jest ez much a fiction ez the one you give me. My name is Caleb Robbins, an' nothin' else; an' ef I ain't always been lied to, Peter is my parent. Don't mention it to him, though, fer my onnat'ral conduct has so warped an' twisted the nerves an' sinners o' his heart that he don't take no more pride in me. I'm the scapegrace an' scapegoat o' the family. Still, I'm what I claim."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"Was Peter's name ever mentioned in our talks?"

"I beg your pardon; it never was. No; there never has been any reason why you should suspect I had an interest in Peter Robbins, or knew of him. When did you leave home?"

"Smack after the tenth o' March."

"And were you there the tenth?"

"Right there, my friend!"

"The night of the tenth?" Vance asked, eagerly.

"The night o' the tenth!" calmly replied the scapegrace.

"Did you see or hear anything out of the common?"

"Piles of it!—piles of it!"

Cale leaned forward as he made this statement, and he and Vance looked into each others' eyes with eager interest.

"Tell me all!" the latter exclaimed.

"Describe your lost man!"

"He was over forty years of age, and not of prepossessing appearance. He had untrimmed hair and wretched clothes, which made him a tramp in style. More than that, an evil life had left its impress on him, and he was not one you would like to meet on a lonely street at night if you carried money."

"I don't imagine you or me will ever meet him there. I fancy we shall have to look for him in the other world."

"Do you mean he is dead?"

"I have had that idea in my mind fer more nor one month, my friend. Et was that which sent me away from Peter's roof."

"You were driven out because—"

"Peter was afraid o' me."

"And you saw Dick Hubbel—"

"Or his double. I don't know which, but ef this an' that don't belong tergether, the cards are runnin' queer. Yes; I reckon Dick is deader than Gin'ral Jackson!"

"Tell me all about it!—tell me every word!"

Nearer to Cale the speaker leaned, and his manner was more eager.

CHAPTER XII.

THE BLOW OF A COWARD.

CALE had no desire to keep his companion in suspense, and the whole story of the events which had preceded his departure from his father's house was clearly and graphically told.

To say it was of absorbing interest to Vance would be to express it but feebly, for every thing seemed to be of vital moment to him and his future.

His first question when all was over was to the point:

"You think Dick Hubbel is dead?"

Caleb moved uneasily.

"I've never got any good usage at my father's hands, but he's my father, in spite o' that. I don't like ter do him wrong, an' though I long suspected he was not livin' so honest as he ought, I never knew anything positively bad about him until that night. You'll see I can't prove nothin', now. I don't want ter be harsh, ef I be cast off, but—you've heerd the story, an' can judge as well as me."

"I appreciate your scruples, and they do you honor when you have been misused so much. Yet, when we remember what you saw, and what Betty Dow heard, together with what I know, what else are we to think than that Dick Hubbel went to his death that night?"

Cale shook his head slowly.

"Looks bad!"

"What can we do?"

"Now you've got me!"

"If Dick was killed, what became of his body?"

"Does it matter much?"

"It matters a good deal. This man had with him papers which were of vast value to me. They were inclosed in a water-proof box, and if he kept them there, were so arranged that even if he were buried in the dampest of soil they ought to have withstood the test of what time has elapsed."

"You said you dug in the sullen?"

"Yes, but in vain."

"Dunno where else he could be buried."

"Yet, it must have been done unless the body was taken to one of the rivers, and you say you saw no team in sight."

"Wouldn't these papers be gobbled an' destroyed, right off, quick?"

"If Dick carried them openly, or revealed them, they undoubtedly would. If he was prudent, and he had a great deal of cunning, something else may have occurred. The box I have mentioned was in imitation of a tobacco-box, and would have been passed over by almost any searcher as too trivial to notice. Nobody, too, would be likely to save the tobacco-box of a man he had murdered. Thus, there is a chance that Dick let no one know he had the papers, and, having negotiated their sale on the sly, they were buried in the secure box and are as good to-day as they ever were."

"Well, say, can't we tackle it?"

Cale asked the question eagerly.

"Where shall we begin?" Vance inquired.

"With my 'honey.'"

"Betty Dow?"

"Yes."

"But you questioned her at the time."

"Et's a good pint ter begin, all same!" quoth Caleb. "I'd rather interview her than any other person I know of in New York. Serious, though, she can't tell no more. I ain't been in Peter's house sence we agreed ter disagree, but I hev seen Betty. Bless you, yes; she an' I go ter a summer blow-out of some sort as often as I get the price. It may be other folks in the alley kin tell us more about the case. I never looked inter it ez I would ef I'd been dead-set on gettin' at the facts. When Peter said 'Git!' I jest simply got a wiggle on an' got. See?"

Vance did not hear all of this address. Now the subject was so vividly brought to mind, and so much light thrown upon it, he became more than ever anxious to follow the trail where it led.

How could the disappearance of Dick Hubbel be solved?

This was the question of paramount importance.

No more was developed in the interview between the present companions, and Vance next went to see Mrs. Ellis. While he was ready to believe all concerning Dick Hubbel, it was hard to credit the statement that Madge was the long-lost daughter of the Avery family.

The interview which followed proved this to be true, however, and he was left to face the surprising fact that he had met the girl by chance and fallen in love with her.

From there he went to Darby Westcott's place of residence, and had a long interview with him.

His return was begun in a mood of deep thought, and would so have continued but for an incident by the way. He was too much wrapped up in the matters referred to to notice what was going on around him. Thus, after a certain point was reached, he did not observe that another man fell in by the way, or that he then steadily followed.

When a dark and little-frequented block was reached, this man quickened his steps so much that he gained rapidly, and finally came close to the leader.

conscious yet, the latter moved on without turning around.

The hand of the follower disappeared beneath his coat. It came out, but not vacant, as it had gone in. Something showed in the hand; then he took two long strides and was by Vance's side.

Up the hand went—it fell, and the sound of a blow came after.

Vance dropped to the sidewalk.

He did not stir, and the sand-bagger—for such he was—looked back and sounded a whistle. He had seen, as he had expected, that a carriage was visible in that quarter, and this vehicle came rapidly forward at his bidding.

Nearing the spot, the driver sprang down from the box.

"All right!" declared the sand-bagger, hurriedly. "Tumble him in!"

He laid hold of Vance, and as the other man gave his aid, the fallen traveler was quickly out of sight. Their success did not cause them to lose sight of prudence, and their work was as prompt as before.

The sand-bagger followed Vance into the carriage, while the driver leaped to the box, applied the whip and sent the team swiftly away.

When the corner of the block was reached, there was nothing left to tell of the daring and lawless deed.

Betty Dow was standing alone in the court near her father's house when some one came up the walk and cleared his throat heavily.

"Cale!" she exclaimed.

"Et ain't nobody else, my princess!" that young man returned. "Ez I didn't have any other business half so good I thought I'd drop around an' see my 'honey.' Did I make any mistake?"

"You bet you didn't!" she declared. "You want to make all your mistakes the same way."

"Well, now, that's nice an' pleasant. Great minds run in the same channel, b'gum! But I ain't come ter whisper Coney Island, this time, Betty."

"Never mind; I'd rather see *you* than Coney Island."

"Elizabeth, you're a young lady who fills my soul with rapture. Ef all girls was like you what a honeysuckle of a world this would be!"

Caleb playfully poked Betty in the ribs, and she made no objection.

"How am I to know you mean it?" she inquired, coquettishly.

"Elizabeth, there was once a feller named Janus, or something o' the sort, who had a double face, so he could look two ways at once. This give him a snap, fer he could see all the free lunches an' chances ter drink that was a-goin', but I ain't built on that plan. I hev only one face, an' that's always turned toward my 'hun'!"

The explanation seemed perfectly satisfactory to Betty, and she looked volumes at her adorer.

"Wal," he resumed, presently, "how does things go now? Any upheavals of consequence in old Swagger Alley?"

"No."

"How is Peter Robbins an' all the little Robbinses?—bless their tender souls!"

"They fight as much as ever."

"Poor critters! An' me not here ter help 'em on! When the kids used ter scrap in old times they never got so mad but what they'd turn around and lay all the blame onter me! They made up the quickest of any kids on record; them kids did. An' I always got lammed! Wa'n't it jolly? You know how I used ter yell. That was afore I got big enough ter stand up fer Caleb Cushing Robbins, an' let 'em hev the worth o' their money, every time they sailed inter me. Then didn't we hev more fun than a goat?"

"I didn't!"

"I know. When they licked me, you used ter feel it more'n I did."

"They had no right ter lick you!" declared Betty, with energy.

"They stopped it when I got big enough, too," and Cale grinned as he remembered the sweet revenge he had taken on the tribe of Peter.

"Somebody else is there, now, Cale."

"Who?"

"A young man."

"Summer boarder?" inquired Cale, facetiously.

"I don't know who he is. I only see him once, but he's still there. Sometimes I think they have him as a prisoner."

"Eh?"

She repeated her words.

"Why do you think that?"

"Well, I see him there first Tuesday mornin'. I happened to look over across the way, an' I see him by the window. He was a nice-lookin' man, an' I stood lookin' at him. He did not seem to be in a happy frame of mind. He gazed out o' the window, but not as if he saw much of anything which was before him. Then I saw a hand reached out which grabbed hold o' him an' pulled him back. He went out o' sight all of a sudden."

"Who did it?" Cale demanded, with some excitement.

"I didn't see; I jest see the hand an' no more."

"Kinder yanked him back, eh?"

"Yes."

"What then?"

"That's all. I watched fer some time, fer I was curious ter know what was up, but it wa'n't no use; I didn't see him no more, ez I said, an' that ended it. I ain't seen him sence, but others hev. He's at your father's, but what he's doin' at I don't know."

"You think he's a pris'n'r, you say?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because o' what I have told you, an' because he don't seem to have much life into him. Meg Murray, she says she thinks he's a prisoner, an' that they keep him drugged, so he won't be of any good."

"What fer a looker is he, anyhow?"

"He's about twenty-five, with black hair an' mustache, and he's got a right handsome face. Looks real toney!"

"B'jinks! that's Vance Drayton!" Cale exclaimed.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE HOUR OF DOOM.

THE declaration was obscure to Betty, but at her request Cale soon made himself understood.

"I've got a frien' named Vance Drayton. He ain't been seen fer three days, an' I've been dead sure that harm had come ter him. It was on his account I dropped around ter-day, fer I wanted ter ask ef you had seen any sign o' him in this section."

"Why should he have come here?" Betty inquired.

"Can't say exactly, though I had an idee that Peter Robbins didn't love him any more nor he does the scapegoat o' his family."

"Your father must be an awful man, Cale! But I know he is, the way he used to abuse you when you's small."

"I've kinder outgrown that, but my frien' Vance ain't, I'm afeerd. Bet ye a dollar he's the man who's shut up there!"

"Can you do anything for him?"

"Can I? Can I? Why, great guns! I've got ter. Yes, siree; I've got ter do it, an' I will. Somehow or other, their secrets must be mine, an' so must their prisoner."

The boy spoke in a musing tone. He had come there to see if such was the state of affairs, and results only confirmed his own ideas. What troubled him was, however, how was he to get rid of the trouble?

He and the police had never been on intimate terms, and he had a notion they would pay no attention to a complaint from him unless he could have better grounds for it.

"Why don't you see one of your brothers or sisters?" asked Betty.

Cale grimaced humorously.

"I hev a very vivid recollection of hev'in' tried that way once before, jest previous ter the hour when I packed up my traps an' left the Robbins mansion so I couldn't contaminate the tribe o' Peter. Yes; an' I know how it worked. I thank *you*, but I guess I won't interview my virtuous relatives."

"I wouldn't. But what will you do?"

"I kin see but one way—crawl inter the winder after they've gone ter bed."

"Oh! Cale, what ef they ketch you?"

"Then I'll go down an' swap stories with Cap'n Kidd, McGinty, the mermaids, an' other superannuated chestnuts!"

Nothing could disturb Cale's composure, but he was not so thoughtless as he seemed. He realized even better than Betty that he would run a good deal of risk in entering the house, but the effort was to be made in a good cause, and he intended to run the risk.

It was already nine o'clock, and he had not so very long to wait. He went into the Dow house and passed another hour with the girl, but so near to the window that he could watch Robbins's home.

He hoped something might transpire which would give him some clew, but it was not to be. He saw the various members of the family

which had been his but was that no longer. They came and went, but the supposed prisoner did not appear.

At ten o'clock Cale left the house and spent a time on the street near at hand. By that hour he had formed a plan of action, and only awaited the right moment to begin.

Watching the neighboring clock closely, he finally settled down to business.

Returning to the alley, he advanced to a certain point next to his old home and surveyed the wall thereof.

"No change!" he murmured, with an air of satisfaction. "I kin climb it like a fly!"

He lay hold of a window-sill and swung himself up a trifle. This done he found other holds for his hands and feet. He improved them all and ascended steadily until on a level with the second-story windows. Then he succeeded in raising a sash and crawling in.

He smiled grimly.

"Peter, you didn't think I'd come home in this way, did you? Wal, you can't always tell, Peter; even burglars don't always see fit ter enter by the door. Et don't matter, as long as I'm here, an' I feel sure you'd be glad ter see yer prodigal son even ef he come down the chimney. I know your lovin' heart, Peter!"

Cale was enjoying the situation thoroughly, but he did not long pause to indulge in frivolities. He went on his way, needing no light, and steadily advancing toward the room where the supposed prisoner had been seen.

Reaching the door he tried it.

It was locked.

"Jest ez I expected. Now fer the next act!"

He had been at considerable trouble to decide how to proceed next, but the plan was his, and he acted without undue delay.

From his pocket he took a chisel he had procured at Dow's, and with this he was about to attack the door and attempt to pry it open when footsteps sounded on the stairs. He was duly alert, and in a very short time he had retreated to such a distance that he had no immediate fear of discovery.

It surprised him that any one was moving without a light, and he wondered as to the cause, but he was to be enlightened.

By the closed door the unknown paused. A match was ignited; the flame sprung up; Cale saw his father.

The light was communicated to the lamp the night wanderer carried.

Cale had not seen his parent to observe him closely since the time he was driven out. A great change was now visible in him. His once-florid face was flacid no longer; he was surprisingly pale. More than that, the hand which held the light trembled as he stood there.

His lips moved and he seemed to say something, but the words were not audible to the watcher.

Again footsteps sounded and another man came up the stairs. He was a stranger to Cale, but Peter Robbins received him phlegmatically.

"Have you been in?" asked the unknown.

"Not yet."

"Open the door."

"Dan, won't you do this alone?"

"I've answered that before!" snapped the stranger.

"I'm not myself to-night."

"Do you weaken?"

"I believe I do," Peter confessed, nervously.

"Bah! you've done such work before!"

"I have, but not under such circumstances. This man is stupid from the drug, you say; and he's never done me any harm. It's a mean thing to take him unawares, like this."

"Well, you *are* a flat!" sneered Dan.

"Call me what you will, but I'll give you all the money if you'll do the job alone."

"I'll do nothin' o' the sort. We're in the same boat, an' you've give yer promise. You've got ter stand by it."

Peter stood looking down at the floor, his pallor more marked than ever.

"Go in an' take a gaze at him; it'll brace you up!" added Dan, with a curl of his lips.

Robbins suddenly raised his head. It is to be doubted that conscience had assailed him at all; he was not one usually afflicted that way. He was simply weak for the time being, and did not take kindly to the work. He scowled at Dan.

"Let us see who is the greater coward!" he retorted. "You have done all the maneuvering with the prisoner; I don't even know what he looks like. He may be black or white, brown or blue. I'll show you I'm no weakling, though."

He unlocked the door and swung it open. Both men entered.

Cale had been an eager listener to all that had

been said. It had been enough to inform him that dark and deadly work was intended, and he felt that if help was to come to the prisoner, he was none too soon.

How he, alone, could give that help, he did not stop to reflect.

He stole forward to the door, and improved the chance to look within. The light brought by the men was doing its duty, and he had a good view. The result was at once interesting. He saw another person lying on the bed, and the face thus revealed was not by any means new to him.

He recognized Vance Drayton!

Although he had fully expected it, the discovery was a startler.

Vance there, and exposed to men who undoubtedly meant to kill him!

The young man was asleep. He lay so his face was fully to be seen. He was pale, and more than that might be read in it. The vague intimations that he was not in his usual mental condition were easily to be believed, then.

Adversity pressed heavily upon him.

Peter Robbins went forward and held the light where he obtained the most good from it. It flickered on the pale visage, and the intruders had ample view.

Cale regarded his father. Would he be base enough to carry out the murderous plot they had formed? Watching thus closely, the boy was enabled to detect a sudden start on Peter's part; a fresh change of color, and an air of wonder and incredulity.

Presently the hand which held the lamp began to tremble, and he turned a pair of enlarged eyes upon Dan.

"Got them again?" sneered the latter.

"Man, who is this?" whispered Peter.

"I don't know or care!"

"I do!" Robbins declared. "His is no strange face. Unless I err amazingly, I know him well. It is Ralph Proctor!"

CHAPTER XIV.

CHAMPION CALE.

CALE did not know what the last word meant, but one thing remained clear in his mind. Vance was in deadly danger, and his defense depended alone on a youth who had not the strength to save him.

The watcher wished, then, for the gifts of a Samson, but he had only those of a boy.

The light shining in his eyes awakened Vance. He moved uneasily; he opened his eyes; he sat up; he looked at his companions.

Dull and heavy was his face—it was clear that not even the danger awakened the torpid mind which was all he had left of the old vigor of intellect.

"Who are you?" he asked, apathetically.

No one seemed disposed to reply, and he went on:

"I don't know you, and I'm not fit to receive callers."

He pressed his hand to his head as he spoke, and it was evident that there was much of bewilderment there.

"Leave me until I am fit to talk," he added, sudden uneasiness showing in his manner. "I can't think, now, but there's something wrong in all this. I ought to be keen and active, now: I know I had; but I can't. Something is wrong—all wrong!"

Even pitiful his air had grown, yet it made no impression on Dan. He pulled at Peter's sleeve.

"Go on!" he urged.

"Go on?" repeated Vance; "what are you going to do?"

"This bloke will tell ye!" and Dan pointed viciously at Robbins.

Vance looked at Peter, but the latter had nothing to say. It was an opportunity Dan did not fail to improve. He had no sympathy with a dallying method, so he determined to end it. He thrust his hand into his pocket, and brought out a knife. The motion had been intended for one of cunning, and secrecy, but it miscarried.

Vance turned at just the wrong moment, and saw the weapon exposed.

His eyes dilated.

"Vultures!" he exclaimed, "I read your intentions! You mean murder!"

Dan leaped forward, and grasped the prisoner.

"Get ready to catch the signs!" he ordered, to Peter.

He no longer had an unwilling aid. Vance, known to Robbins, was a very different man from an unknown. The master of the house acted with promptness. He flung a rubber blanket out, making a shield for all tell-tale signs.

With one motion the big ruffian forced Vance down upon it.

"Now!" he cried.

He swung up the knife.

He aimed a deadly blow.

Another blow came before his own. There was a shock, and the murderous hand fell. Dan toppled over helplessly. Then Peter was swept over sideways by the action of a tightly-held rug; a novel weapon which might have been sneered at, but was proved no mean thing, now.

Vance was pulled roughly to his feet.

"Get a wiggle on!" shouted the voice of Cale. "Rouse, Amos; rouse, or you are a gone goose! Hump yourself, and hustle!"

The prisoner was hurried toward the door. He had no intellect, then, to aid in the work, but an instinct told him the order should be obeyed. He did obey.

All this was the work of Cale. Surprising it certainly appeared, yet it was not miraculous. He owed much to the fact that he had moved in the light of a surprise, himself. Those he had acted against had not had the least clew to his presence until all was over, and it was to this he owed so much. But now both were on their feet, and the case grew dark.

"After them!" hissed Dan. "Kill them, or prepare to die yourself!"

The fugitives were crossing the threshold. Cale looked back. He realized how little they were fitted to cope with the enemy when Vance was not governed by any ray of reason. What could be done?

"The light! I must get rid of that!" he thought.

He had instinctively held to the rug, and this now went spinning toward the pursuers. The aim was good; the light disappeared at once.

Cale hung to Vance's arm.

"Foller me!" he cried.

The young man was bewildered but obedient. He went as directed, and in a short time they were in the kitchen. Here seemed to be the road of escape. Cale sprung to the door. He tried to throw it open. Then he grew dismayed—the key was not in the lock.

"Great guns!" he gasped.

The rattle of heavy steps sounded on the stairs; he knew the men were in swift pursuit. They would soon be there, and when they came, what chance would he have against such odds?

"B'jinks! Amos, we're gone up!" he exclaimed.

Vance Drayton's sluggish mind struggled to thrown off the incubus. It was no permanent injury, and the danger stirred him to a degree of coherence. He could not cast off the spell at once, yet there was a change for the better.

"Something must be done!" he cried. "What—what can be done?"

The light began to dance along the wall; the men were at hand. With a last effort Cale seized his friend's arm.

"This way!" he ordered.

It was to the cellar he turned, and the change was one of good judgment. Really, it was the one way left open to them. He hurried Vance down the steps just as the pursuers reached the room above.

There was a lock to this door, and Cale used the chance and turned the key in time. It was but a frail obstacle, though it was something.

"Can we get out of here?" Vance asked, with growing coherence.

"B'jinks! I don't know!"

"They can follow."

"Sure fer you!"

Now they were on the cellar bottom. The door above rattled; it was plain the enemy knew just where to look for them. And they were left in utter darkness.

Cale stood still. He knew the place of old; he knew it was a monument of decay, and that if due time was allowed them it would not be hard to get out. But certainly, the time would not be given. It would not be long before they must face the worst. Yet, as there seemed only one way, he was not disposed to rest in stupid inactivity for a moment.

At one side there was a cellar-window, and its nature was not such as to resist attack. If he only had time!

He sprung to the point in question, and began to pull wildly at the obstruction.

"They are beating down the door!" exclaimed Vance.

"Let them beat!" panted Cale.

"The wood cracks under their blows!"

"There's a ripple here, too!"

"It won't long resist them!"

"There's life in this section, you bet!"

"Hurry! They are almost here!"

"We are wholly here!"

Cale was pulling at earth and old boards. The outlook was brighter than before; the fresh breeze was fanning his hot face. Oh! for a little time!—just a little time! But the enemy were beating at the frail barrier, and nobody knew better than Cale what that meant. Oh! for a little more time!

Suddenly the boy was almost knocked down by a fall of earth, and a cry rose to his lips.

"This way!—this way, Amos! Come on; come on, ef ye value yer life! Come on!"

Vance Drayton's wits were each moment freeing themselves more and more from the incubus, and he did not fail to heed the order. He hastened to his loyal helper's side.

"Up, up!" Cale gasped. "It's the last call. Now or never! Up, if you don't want to be a dead man!"

"You go first—"

"Up, you dunce—up, ef you don't want me ter go alone an' leave you. Up!"

The young champion lifted like a giant, and his peremptory manner carried conviction. Vance hesitated no more. He grasped at whatever was available, and in another instant was at the point of success or failure. Would the aperture prove large enough?

The question was answered as he writhed through, and Cale breathed a sigh of relief. He did not doubt his own ability to go through like a snake, as it were, but there were reasons why he did not have it all his own way.

There was a shock near the head of the stairs, and the door came down with a crash. Only a little, a very little time was allowed him.

"Kill them at first sight!" hissed a voice at the top of the staircase.

Cale laid hold of the wall and raised himself with the artificial strength which was his at that crisis. His enemies came bounding down the steps.

"There's one of them!" cried the hostile voice.

"Yes; one of them was there; he was fully seen; but the view was not all the pursuers could wish. One moment Cale was visible; the next he had drawn himself through the aperture and was gone.

"Great guns an' Bowery growlers!" he exclaimed, with the old nonchalance, "ef that wa'n't a close call, what fer a 'caller' was it?"

Vance was not in mood to feel the relief his companion experienced, but he did realize a part of it. Then a voice sounded in the cellar:

"Shoot them through the winder!"

"Shoot yer uncle!" irreverently retorted Cale, as he grasped Vance's arm and pulled him out of range. "Amos Epaphrus Allen, git yer movers inter life an' foller me. There ain't an atom o' danger left ef we only think it, but we can't stop here ter play checkers, nor pitch pennies. Bowl away, my boundin' buck from Barbary!"

Cale was in high spirits, now, and he chuckled his exhilaration as he hurried Vance out of the alley. He knew not how soon the two men would get out of the cellar, nor did he care. He knew they would not have any chance to do them harm now the house was left, and the revulsion of feeling left him in his happiest mood.

As he turned into the street Vance spoke again:

"I don't understand this."

"My frien', you don't need ter. One o' the biggest mistakes folks makes in this world is ter try an' understan' what they don't need ter. It's a wearin' an' tearin' on the gray matter o' the brain that is reelly hijjus. Avoid it as you would p'ison!"

They were on the sidewalk, now, and proceeding in a leisurely way. Cale wanted to see the baffled murderers come out and observe how they would take their defeat. In this he was not disappointed. They did soon appear, but their manifestation was of the simplest kind.

They looked up and down the street; then, after a pause, turned back into the alley.

"Boy," asked Vance, "you are Caleb Robbins, are you not?"

"My way-bill is marked that way."

"Then I ask you, what has happened to me? Why am I the wreck I am? I see, yet I do not comprehend. What has happened to me?"

CHAPTER XV.

A STARTLING THEORY.

CALE shook his head.

"Don't ye remember nothin'?"

"The last clear recollection I have is of bein' on the street, and homeward bound. This was Tuesday night, I think."

"Ye don't remember nothin' since?"

"Not distinctly," replied Vance, frowning

thoughtfully. "There is a confused medley, like the fantastic work of a dream. No more!"

"Don't remember bein' kidnapped on the street?"

"No. Was I?"

"That's what I can't say, though I have an idea you was. Can't see no other way, in fact. Reckon they must hev laid fer you an' give it to ye in the neck, as it were. Then they must hev give you drugs to keep ye from knowin' too much."

Vance shivered.

"What a horrible experience!"

"Never mind, general; it's over with, now— all over. You're as safe as mice. Wal, shall we toddle on?"

Vance had come to a stop, and Cale, feeling that the danger was certainly over, had not refused him the opportunity to meditate all he desired. Yet, the streets of New York were not just the best of sleeping places, and the boy was willing to get home and rest there. They started on and turned a corner.

The movement brought them in sight of a singular scene.

Close at hand was a closed "man-hole," that ever-present reminder of the waters and sewers of the great city, and upon the cover a man was sitting. The position was certainly peculiar, for even Cale had never seen any one thus occupied before, but there was a reason of a certain kind for it, as was soon made clear.

The man saw them and called:

"Come over here an' see him come out!"

"See who?" Cale inquired.

"The man who was down in here," and the speaker waved his hand toward the place under him.

It was clear from his movements and utterance that he was intoxicated, and Cale did not find him a subject of much interest.

"I've seen such sights many a time before, an' you had better—"

"You never see one like this. They put him down three months ago, an' he ain't got out, yet."

"Put who down?"

"The man they put down."

"Clear as mud, an' as your jangled-up brain. Fire up some o' the whisky, mister, an' you'll feel better. Et don't agree with ye fer a cent. You dreamed all this."

"I tell ye I see what I say. They put him down, an' he ain't never come up, but his spirit come ter me last night in a dream, an' said he would rise ter-night. He will, too. The dead always do rise; they can't be kept down, let 'em try ever so hard. Et's no use, at all. He will come up, an' ef you want ter see the fun, jest you stay here an' take it in!"

"Who was this man?"

"That's what I'm waitin' fer him ter come up an' tell me. I don't know, but he can tell. Mebbe he used ter live in Swagger Alley, for they brought him out o' there. Yes, they brought him out, holdin' on ter him as ter gold; an' they brought him to this man-hole, an' got the cover up an' chucked him in. Splash! Just one sound, an' then it was all over! He was gone, an' he ain't come up yet!"

Cale was no longer indifferent.

"Mister, did you see this, really?" he asked, eagerly.

"Sure!"

"They brought the man out o' Swagger Alley?"

"Yes."

"An' dumped him in here?"

"Yes."

"Did you see how he looked?"

"Not a look."

"When did this happen?"

"Last spring."

"Can't you tell more exactly?"

"I didn't make no note of it. All I know is that they put him down in here, an' he ain't never got up; his spirit told me that. Yes; he's still down, an' it must be a wet berth ter sleep in. Swish, swish, the waters go, rolling over him all the time! Swish, swish! Then there are the rats! Ugh! no wonder he wants to come up! He never knew what hurt him, I reckon; he must hev been dead when they put him down. Still, it wouldn't be pleasant. Very likely he had a mother when he was young who used ter tuck him in his little bed every night. Think how different he must feel ter sleep in the sewer!"

The drunken man began to weep in a maudlin way, while Cale regarded him in deep interest. Was there something, or nothing, in his words?

Plainly, the fellow was in a mood where he was liable to imagine all kinds of things which never had occurred, but what he had said was so

striking that Cale was not disposed to act the part of a cynic. He wanted to see more of this person.

"Say, mister," he remarked, "ef you stay here there'll be a policeman around in the shake of a lamb's tail an' run you in. Ef that is done, you'll lose all chance o' seein' the feller rise out o' his wet bed. Now, you go with me, an' I'll take keer o' you an' see that no cop don't light on yer neck with melancholy force. See?"

"Can't leave until he rises," persisted the drunkard.

"But what o' the cop?"

"I'll tell him about it."

"Did you ever make a cop believe you?"

"Never did, by mighty!"

"Then come with me. Come on, immediate! The cop will be here in a jif. You want ter get a wiggle on. Come!"

He was dragging the stranger up, and his eloquence was not thrown away. The unknown consented to be convinced. He got upon his feet, and though he could hardly stand, he made due effort to accompany his new acquaintances. The procession moved away down the street.

Cale had an idea in his mind. Not yet had Vance caught on to the idea, and, indeed, in his darkened condition of mind he did not understand what the boy's object was, but he made no remonstrance to having such company.

As Cale piloted the drunkard's uncertain steps, the ludicrous side of the case occurred to him.

"Go it, ye cripples!" he exclaimed. "Let the blind lead the blind! Put yer best foot forward, fellers, fer this is a gay an' festive procession. Let the whangdoodle howl an' all natur' be glad. Oh, we're solid citizens o' Gotham!"

His remarks were not appreciated by his companions, but if they had been there would have been no need of the remarks. So Vance walked on with heavy steps, and the drunkard with many a lurch and reel, while Cale piloted the whole outfit and laughed at their condition.

Once at the house he changed to his old business manner, however. Vance was not fit for anything, so he was helped to bed by his young ally, who had full confidence that he would awaken in his right senses; and then Cale gave attention to his new recruit once more.

The drunkard showed strong inclination to go to sleep, but he was not allowed to do it.

Cale put him under cross-fire, bound to learn all he could about the affair so hinted at by the man.

It was no easy matter, but the story, simply told, was to the effect that the narrator, who claimed the name of Charles Flynn, had one night seen two men bear a third out of Swagger Alley and dump him down the "man-hole" upon which the narrator had that night been sitting when discovered by Cale, waiting for the dead man to "rise."

It was a sensational story for the listener, and he asked many questions to get more light on the subject. Especially did he wish to fix the exact date when the matter had occurred, but this he did not succeed in doing.

Flynn had had no reason for committing that matter to mind, and he did not attempt to. He persisted, however, in the statement that he had seen all he alleged, and the nearest he could come to the date was all in line with Cale's sudden theory that it was thus Dick Hubbel had been disposed of.

When Flynn had been put to bed, also, Cale reviewed the evidence.

It had always been a mystery what had become of Hubbel's body, if he was, indeed, killed. Vance and his companion had ripped the cellar up without finding any sign, and if the body had been committed to the river, there was no record of its having been recovered therefrom.

What simpler way could the plotters have found than to tear up the cover of the "man-hole" and dump the dead man into the sewer?

"B'jinks! I b'lieve I'm on the track," muttered Cale, "an' I'll present it to Vance as soon as he wakes up. I hope he'll come to in his right senses!"

The night was well spent. Cale was sleepy, and he lay down and fell asleep at once.

It was broad daylight when he again became conscious.

He heard some one stirring in Vance's room, and went in to see him. The young man was up and looking better than his aid had dared to expect. More than that, the light of reason was in his eyes.

"Wal, old chap, how goes it?" was Cale's salute.

"That's what I want to know. I am all in a state of bewilderment, and in a hurry for light. Ideas press upon me. Are they real, or only the delusions of a dream?"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE NEW CLEW.

THE question exhibited confusion, but not of a kind to alarm Cale. On the contrary, Vance was coherent of speech and look, and the listener felt there was ground for the strongest hopes. He seemed to have recovered fully.

"What do you remember?" the boy quietly inquired.

Vance knit his brows thoughtfully.

"A longly street at night; something like a blow; a vague and horrible blank; faces around me which were far from friendly; conversation I could hear but not understand; bitter and nauseous draughts which were forced down my neck; a constant terror without the power of getting rid of it; a fight, or series of fights, in which you seem to have had a share; a feeling that my life was in peril— My young friend, you must know a part of what I am trying to grasp. Tell me all without delay!"

"I'm your huckleberry," smiled Cale. "You've been in the p'isonest fix any white man ever struck sence John Smith was saved by Pocahontuck an' had ter marry her ter get red o' her. But it's all right, an' you hev got yer mental suspenders back an' yer trowsers hitched up high. Et's all right, Absalom!"

The explanation which followed was long and, to both, interesting. No great amount of light could be thrown on Vance's captivity, then, and there was no ground for hope that it ever would be different, but that was not a vital matter. The drug which had so long kept his powers under subjection had lost its force, and he was himself again.

This was the most important point of all.

He, however, was not disposed to believe so readily as Cale in the theory that the mystery of Dick Hubbel's disappearance had been solved.

"The man was drunk," he reminded. "He may have imagined it all."

"Try him an' see."

"We'll do it, and do it at once."

"Wal, now see here! He's likely ter deny it all. What'll you do, then?"

"What can I do?"

"Make believe you feel dead sure he spoke the truth last night, an' do it in a business way. Ef you weaken an' let him see you don't hev no faith in yer own case, what good will it do ye to wrestle with him?"

"Sound as ever! Bring in your man, and you'll see me act the veritable bulldozer, if he denies his own story."

"Mister V. Drayton, you're a brick! See that you stick to it. Now fer the man with an alcoholic volcano in his inner tabernacle!"

Cale went for the drunkard, and brought him in after some delay. He was now sober—decidedly so. The whisky had gone and left him weak and ill. He had been drunk too many times to repent, but not to feel the pangs of sickness.

Vance assumed a judicial manner and presented his case in brief, clear words. Flynn looked angry.

"I never said anything of the sort!" he declared.

"We both heard you."

"Well, I was drunk at the time."

"And you lied?"

"If I said I saw any one thrown into the 'man-hole,' I did."

"Such a freak was not natural. You must have had grounds for your statement."

"I had none."

"Sure?"

"Of course I am."

Vance leaned forward over the table and put on his sternest look.

"Mr. Flynn, what reason have you for lying about this affair?"

"Lying? Lying, sir? I'll have you understand—"

"And I'll have you understand, sir," Vance retorted, "that you are going to get yourself into trouble by the course you are pursuing. If you are an honest man you can have no object in denying the truth, but if you do deny it, it will be clear to me that you have a guilty reason for your conduct. Do you hear, sir?—a guilty reason! If you are not with the right, you are against it. There can be no half-way course. Who put the dead man down the 'man-hole'? Are you sure you did not? You seem mighty anxious to save the criminals from the result of their crime!"

His manner went as far as his words, and Mr. Flynn grew alarmed.

"I'd like to see you prove there was any dead man in it!" he exclaimed, belligerently, yet with a quaver.

"We shall know that in a short time. We are having the sewer searched, already!"

Flynn surrendered at once.

"Hang it all!" he declared, "I ain't going to get myself into trouble for the sake of keeping out of it. That's why I have been mum in the past, but it seems the danger signal points the other way, now. Well, I did see just what I said!"

"And a man was put in the place you say?"

"Yes."

"Who was it?"

"That I don't know, and never did. It was a sight presented to my view one night. I saw the business, but decided to keep still rather than get myself into trouble. If I'd gone to the House of Detention, how could I have got the whisky which has been the bliss, and the curse of my life?"

"Tell us all about it!"

"I was on the street, one night, and just comfortably full. Mind you, I was not in condition to imagine anything which did not have its being in fact; oh! no!"

"Standing near a doorway I saw two men come out of Swagger Alley bearing some sort of burden. It was late for the carrying of anything, and the fact that they came just after a patrolman had passed, impressed me as being peculiar."

"I watched them closely."

"They bore the burden to the 'man-hole' and there laid it down. Then with something they had brought they attacked the cover, and soon had it up. After that, all was soon over."

"They raised the burden and flung it down the hole."

"Next they replaced the cover with celerity; then turned and retreated to the alley. I saw them no more, and what had occurred went no further by my telling it. As I've said, I wanted no part of the House of Detention."

"Did you see the man's face?" Vance asked.

"No."

"Are you sure it was a man? May it not have been a bundle of old clothes?"

"People don't usually dispose of old clothes in that way," dryly reminded Flynn. "Yes, I'm sure it was a man. I saw the general shape of him; I saw his arms and legs dangle about. I'll swear it was a man!"

There ended the drunkard's story. More questions were asked him, and all were freely answered, but developments did not follow.

Flynn was without money after his debauch, and a good deal demoralized, physically, so he readily agreed to remain under Vance's care for the time being. This the latter wished should be the case, for he did not want to lose sight of him, and one thing more seemed necessary at once.

He sat down and wrote a note to Darby Westcott, and Cale was soon on his way with it.

The sport answered the call promptly, and was made aware of all that had been learned.

"You have a vast amount of wisdom in regard to things," Vance remarked. "Will you tell me if it is worth our attention to try and visit the sewer below the 'man-hole'? I think it is, yet remember the time which has elapsed. From what I know I am of the opinion that when a body goes into the sewers it is likely to float out within a day or two. I know of some cases where this has occurred, and the body has been found in the river. Now, is it possible that any body could so long remain undiscovered in the sewers?"

Darby shook his head.

"I don't think so."

"Mind you, I say is it possible?"

"A word of wide meaning. Possible! Well, we're told all things are possible. I've won at poker with only a bob-tail flush, and seen a fifty-to-one 'shot' win at Gutfenberg. All things are possible. As for how many chances in a hundred you have of finding Dick Hubbel's body in the sewer, I should say about one-half of a chance. But ask a man who knows. I can take you to a chap who makes that line his daily occupation, and knows the sewers like I do the streets of this glorious city. 'Old Rats,' we call him."

"And he will guide me through the underground labyrinths?"

"Yes."

"We shall have the chance!"

"Do you imagine the papers could have survived all the wear and tear of time; the effects of the water and the teeth of the rats which swarm in the sewers?" asked Darby, gravely.

"I have told you of the box before. Made for a peculiar purpose, it could defy the rats and the water, being absolutely proof against both. All I fear is that the device of the box

which made it appear a mere snuff-box did not deceive Dick Hubbel's slayers, and that they got the papers before the body ever went to the sewer."

"Again you will have to take the one chance in many. Don't let me discourage you, but if you find the things you want you may count yourself in great luck."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE LIVING AND THE DEAD.

"OLD RATS'll guide you; Old Rats'll show you how it's done! Down you shall go; down, down, down! Around you the dark waters will roll, and the four-legged rats'll squeak; above you the great city will live on and never dream of the life below ground! Ha! ha! Old Rats'll show you! He will, he will!"

The speaker was a little old man who looked more like a thing conjured up from vague antiquity than a modern man. He addressed Vance Drayton and Darby Westcott, and the bargain had just been made for him to take them through that part of the sewers where it was hoped the body of Dick Hubbel would be found.

Still, they were not especially hopeful. This man, a worker in the underground world, had confirmed all their fears in regard to the result, and it was a last resort, rather than a venture founded on hope which they were about to try.

A few hours later three men were in a room on Hudson street. Of the party one was Peter Robbins and another, Norris Farley. The third was a big, coarse-looking fellow who had an especially sinister face.

"Now for your plans!" exclaimed Peter, addressing Farley.

That young man did not seem pleased with the prospect.

"There's only one thing open to us," he declared. "They are going to the lower world to look for a dead man. It's a pity they should be disappointed. Well, they shall not. There shall be dead men there; we'll furnish them to order. Seriously, unless we are prepared to give up the battle and let them ruin us at their leisure, this is our time to strike for our final victory."

The speaker leaned forward over the table and added in a low and impressive voice:

"They must die in the sewer!"

Peter Robbins shook the hand of his companion.

"Good for you!" he returned, heartily. "You show backbone I like. I am with you in this, and, as you say, they shall die in the sewer. Muggs, here, will pilot us to them."

Farley gazed at Muggs.

"You are sure of your information?" he questioned.

"Dead sure!" replied Muggs. "They have hired Old Rats just as I've told you. I hate Old Rats, an' Peter, here, is my friend. I come right along ter let you know."

"You are a brick, and this night shall help you, as well as us, or we'll all go to ruin in the underground world!"

"Ha! ha! ha! Hear the darlings! Hear their dulcet notes, an' see the twinkle o' their eyes! Did ever woman, much as some rave of her, have brighter eyes than theirs?"

The speaker was Old Rats, and the scene was the sewer world of the Metropolis. The old man was keeping his promise to show them the area in which they were interested, and Vance, Darby and Cale followed his lead. He had not taken them down the man-hole where Dick Hubbel was supposed to have disappeared from life, but, by means of a more prudent entrance, had come around and approached gradually.

To Old Rats's last words Cale dryly replied:

"Mister, you kin hev the beauties you love so wal, fer all o' me. My appetite don't run that way. Fer a stew I'd rather hev rabbit than rat, an' ez fer reel beauty, why, I'd give more fer my 'honey' on a Coney Island trip than all the four-legged varmints that swarm the sewers—yes; an' all the two-legged ones, likewise!"

Skeptic that he was, the rodents had effect on Cale and all the other members of the party. They seemed numberless, and the way they watched the intruders in their realm was suggestive of what would happen if one of the latter was there, dead, and at their mercy. The rats were hungry.

The sewer was not so bad as had been anticipated by the uninitiated explorers. The area had been recently "flushed," and the accumulation was so low that their big boots made ample protection and were often covered only to the ankle.

The guide led the way until they were near the

man-hole down which it was supposed Dick Hubbel had gone.

There the search began in earnest.

Old Rats gave but little attention, his manner showing lack of faith, and Darby's interest seemed forced, but Cale was a zealous laborer in his friend's cause. A short investigation showed there was nothing in the immediate vicinity. Vance looked bitterly disappointed.

"What now?" asked Darby.

"Out, out," Old Rats replied; "out toward the river. All things go that way. The river is the destination. Now, the bed of this grand underground city is not level in all places, as you have seen. It is there we must look for signs. Come on!"

They started, but the last speaker lagged and whispered to Darby:

"I feel a bit sorry for the boy. He might as well search in the head o' the Goddess o' Liberty, on Bedloe's Island, as here. All signs are long since gone. It must be so."

Darby did not reply. The practical common sense of the statement could not be gainsayed, however, and he was rather sorry they had come, to rouse unfounded hopes in Vance's mind.

The scene was uncanny and gruesome. The light flickered feebly on the dripping walls, and the darkest of shadows seemed to lurk in every corner. Troops of rats kept pace with them, and as their eyes gleamed in the corners, they seemed to be waiting for someone to fall by the way and furnish a meal for them.

Old Rats had provided an ample supply of lamps, and the explorers did not keep near together. The work could be more expeditiously done otherwise, and no one would be sorry to have it over.

Vance found himself working practically alone. Not far away he could hear Cale's glib voice, but this attracted only passing attention. He remembered the remark that if anything was found, it would doubtless be at some inequality in the surface, and to these places he gave especial attention.

He had a shock at just such a point, anon.

The level dropped away a little, and he was about to step down when a bony hand, a skeleton hand, was lifted from the shallow flood. For a moment the fingers seemed to point at him; then the hand dropped back, and he could see nothing.

He stood silent, motionless and startled. The whole thing was so weird and uncanny that he had no power of action left, but the feeling soon passed away. He was not superstitious, and his mind turned in practical channels.

"A skeleton hand! What is attached to it?"

Muttering thus, he sprang forward and reached the spot. The water lay but shallow, there, and nothing was concealed from view. He, however, had eyes for but one thing—a human skeleton!

Trembling with excitement, he bent over it. Who had it been in life? Was there one clew to its identity? But no; to him, at least, all skeletons were alike. A clew? There was none!

But as he gazed still further another thing broke upon his vision. He stooped quickly; he plunged his hand below the water; he brought it up with something in his grasp.

It was a box of peculiar style!

He staggered back and leaned against the wall. A box, and such a box as he had seen but once before in his life.

"Just heaven!" he gasped, "it is it!"

For awhile he was incapable of motion. Then he aroused and tried to tear the box open, but it was rusty and firm. It was a momentary disappointment—no more. He had relied on just that secure formation to preserve the papers if they still existed. Surely, he could afford to be patient when it seemed to have done its work well!

His gaze wandered to the skeleton. He no longer doubted it was that of Dick Hubbel. Preserved in spite of the opinions of experts and all others—preserved, but how? No human being would ever know; and was it not enough to know it was there?

So the drunkard's story was true, after all? Dick Hubbel, trying to play false to Vance, had met his fate and gone to a grave no man would covet.

For awhile Vance mused on this, but he was aroused by the sound of voices. He looked back and saw a light glimmering on the walls. What was it? None of his own party was in that quarter.

A sudden impulse led him to recede a few steps and place his own lamp out of sight. Then, drawing a revolver, he went near the skeleton and proceeded to survey the strangers.

The light had grown more pronounced on the wall, and as he regained his old position the others came into view. They were two in number. One carried a bull's-eye lantern, while a stout staff in the hand of the other gave him a belligerent appearance.

"This may be all right!" muttered Vance, "but I can't say I like—"

He paused, started, gazed more keenly; and then over his face came a new expression. More meaning the affair now had.

"The wretches are hunting me!" exclaimed the sewer-searcher. "It is my life they seek!"

The decision was but natural.

The man with the staff was Peter Robbins!

One moment Vance felt dismayed, but he soon saw there was no cause for such a thing.

"Let them come!" he cried. "Why, with this revolver I would fight them both and have no fear. This is my chance to get square with Robbins. I'll show him there is lead in this weapon— But no; let me not be too precipitate. I have friends here, and it is certainly Old Rats's privilege to boss this job. I'll go to him!"

Turning away he caught up his lantern and hastened off. He soon found, though, that all was not so clear sailing as he had imagined. In the time he had been busy the other searchers had wandered on, and he could now see nor hear anything of them.

Believing he knew the right path to take, he hurried along until a light appeared. He was disappointed to see only Cale.

"Where are the others?" he demanded.

"Dunno! Floated out inter the river, mebbe. I ain't seen 'em fer some moons. No; an' I ain't seen nothing else that I'm dead stuck on. Say, this may be a useful adjunct o' the city, but ez fer me, give me the upper world, or give me death. See?"

"Have you no idea where Darby and Old Rats are?"

"Not one."

"I must see them immediately."

"Call up a messenger boy!" Cale gravely suggested.

"Are they down this way?"

"Hark! what's that?" Cale interrupted, catching Vance's arm.

"Revolver-shots! By Heaven! it's too late!"

"Too late fer what?"

But Vance did not wait for the reply. Away he went at full speed, hastening toward the scene of firing as fast as his legs would carry him. And Cale followed close after.

Vance felt that he was going to a place of death. Weapons had been used. Who were the victors, who the—victims?

CHAPTER XVIII.

GATHERED IN.

NORRIS FARLEY was in his father's house. The young man's manner was neither pleasant nor hopeful. He had led a fast life and played desperate games, some of which had ended to his liking, though the most important of all was in abeyance, and he had doubts as to the result.

His father entered.

Elmon Farley was an ornament to the profession he followed: that of protecting his fellow-men from the rogues of New York. As a policeman his reputation was of the best. Now, his expression was grave, and he fixed a peculiar look upon Norris before he sat down and asked: "My son, do you know any one named Madge Ellis?"

The question was a surprise, and under the shock Norris flushed deeply. He tried in vain to hide the fact, and then sullenly replied: "What if I do?"

"There is no 'if' about it; I know you have such an acquaintance."

"Then why did you ask me?"

"To see if all sense of shame was lost—"

"Now, see here! don't start off on another lecture!" Norris cried. "I've heard enough of them. What if I have met and admired a girl?"

"If you had shown that admiration as you ought, it would have been better for you," the policeman gravely replied. "If you had told me of her, instead of pursuing the devious course you have, very different would it have been. Norris, for some time the authorities of this city have been trying to find a Miss Avery. It was I who first learned she was now known as Madge Ellis, but I knew not where she was. You knew. If you had told me I should have reaped honor and money out of it, and it is possible I should have so won her regard that you would have come in for a share. I know not how that is, but if you had remembered you had a father

you would not now be both despised by her and a criminal. To-day I notified the inspector that I could produce her. Developments followed, and I now know enough to advise you to get out of New York as soon as you can go. Do this if you would avoid arrest!"

The policeman's voice shook with emotion. The unworthy son gazed at him in silence. He was too reckless to heed the danger of arrest, but one thing appealed to him—if he had pursued an honorable course, perhaps he might have won Madge!

The thought of what he had thrown away was maddening.

The door-bell rung.

Neither heeded it. The father had something to say, and he was going on when the door opened without ceremony. He looked around in vexation. What he saw alarmed him, but it meant more to his son. Norris grew very pale.

Several persons were at the threshold, and among them were Vance Drayton and Cale Robbins!

The foremost of all the party bowed gravely to the elder Farley.

"We have called upon you in regard to the matter which lately called you to Police Headquarters," he announced, quietly; "and I will say that new information has come to hand. By means of papers recently and singularly recovered, and by the confession of a sorely-wounded and desperate man named Peter Robbins, there is now enough known to set every vessel on its right legs. Light has come in dark places!"

"Fact, b'jinks!" declared Cale. "We've had trouble enough ter turn our yaller hair gray, but it kinder seems ter me we're still in it. The goose hangs on the upper balcony, an' the birds are mostly in the hand, rather than in the bush!"

"It is my painful duty," added the previous speaker, "to announce that I have a warrant for your son's arrest, Mr. Farley!"

Not a word said the policeman. He had expected it. His plan of flight had come too late.

Norris was very pale. He, too, was silent, however.

"There is one way in which all this may be averted," went on the officer, "and that the way is open is due to the generosity of Mr. Ralph Proctor, sometime known as Vance Drayton. The latter has had a great load lifted from his mind and character. By the recovery of certain papers which have long lain in the sewers of the city, lost, and yet safe, it is known that he has no crime to answer for.

"When he and his father were trying to get out of the mire in squaring the accounts of the latter's friend, Mr. Avery, they were plotted against by enemies who need not be named here. One Peter Robbins did a robbery to help the enemy, and the fruits of this came near ruining both the Proctors.

"Dick Hubbel lost his life by taking to Robbins the papers I have mentioned, after stealing them from young Proctor, and matters were long in an unsettled state.

"Particulars in regard to these things need have no part here, as all was of the nature of business. Enough to say that all is settled now—all, unless your son sees fit to accept the mercy generously offered by Ralph Proctor, and will make confession that he and Gilson, the detective, tried to ruin Proctor by falsely proving him a thief.

"Let your son admit this, and he can be free from prosecution; but let him remember it is his father's good name, not his own, which saves him."

"That's a fact!" declared Cale. "When I remember how I stuffed myself up like a balloon, ter hide that silk in my raiment, it makes me feel gallus, but I'm not goin' ter kick on Amos's bargains. But ef you don't come ter time, won't we do you up beautiful, Norris!"

The door opened and several other persons entered. First of all was Gilson, the prisoner of a stout officer, and close behind them was Madge Ellis conducted by Darby Westcott. The dishonest detective looked only at Norris.

"Don't let them bulldoze you!" he cried. "They will try to make you tell a parcel of lies, but remember there can be no proof of what they allege. Be firm; admit nothing, for we have done nothing, and all will be well. Admit nothing!"

The elder Farley rose.

"My son," he spoke, in a trembling voice, "keep back no part of the truth, for if you do I shall tell all I know! These men would not lie to you. They promise you freedom from arrest, and that means a chance to begin a new life. Will you refuse that chance, my son?"

Emotion almost overcome the father, and more than one eye was filled with responsive tears.

Gilson would have spoken again, but the man by his side silenced him peremptorily. All eyes were turned upon Norris. Would he be mad enough to decline his last chance?

He was very pale, and the struggle was great. He looked at Madge and thought what he had lost. At last he raised his head.

"I will admit all my guilt," he whispered, "but I wish some one would shoot me dead!"

"Not so!" cried his father. "Live! Live for the new life; live to redeem your name. Live, and the future will not be all a desert!"

"Right you are, mister!" affirmed Cale. "I've seen some close shaves, myself, but I'm still on deck. Mighty pile o' troubles we run up ag'in, but if we wiggle right, we're bound ter get the bulge on things. Cheer up, an' we'll all help you who ain't ag'in' you!"

"This villainous boy has been the cause of all our troubles!" cried Gilson, madly. "Oh! let me at him—let me at him!"

He tried to spring upon Caleb, but was easily restrained. The boy laughed lightly.

"Mister, ef your mind is as easy as mine, I don't see ez we need hev an atom o' diffikilty. Seems ter me things is as cute ez they kin be. I ain't sayin' a word, but this is my toast when we drink next time: Here's to Law an' Lovers; may both always flourish!"

And he winked to Vance and Madge until the latter blushed a rosy red.

Norris did not refuse the chance to confess, and he was saved thereby. A position was secured for him in a South American country, and he left New York. Reports are to the effect that he is living an honest life.

Gilson found himself in difficulty galore, and was sent to prison for an appropriate term.

In the fight in the sewer, from which Darby and Old Rats escaped without injury, Peter Robbins was fatally wounded. He died before he could be tried for the slaying of Dick Hubbel, of which crime he made full confession.

The Proctors were fully on their feet, once more, and Ralph's father was enabled to return from exile. Business rivals having been defeated and proven wrong, they resumed their old life with unclouded names.

Madge's case did not prove hard to settle; Ralph attended to all that, and closed up the account by marrying her.

Caleb was taken under Ralph's own protection, and put in the way of becoming a useful citizen. The boy retained his fondness for Betty Dow, and as Madge was shrewd enough to see what was likely to come of it, she decided that Cale ought not to be the only one to receive the advantages of education and other things; and as a result Betty was also taken in charge.

There is no more to tell of the once goat of the Robbins family—the only prospering—but it is safe to assume it will make his mark.

Darby Westcott remains a family friend, and a loyal helper.

And so ends the record until Cale adds to it in public life.

THE END.

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